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ABSTRACT

A practicum intervention designed to decrease the incidence of retention of students in first grade, through a diagnostic-prescriptive intervention program and teacher inservice activities, was implemented and evaluated. Teachers at two schools were aided in the early identification of students at-risk for retention; psycho-educational evaluations were performed; and individual educational plans were made for the students. Additionally, monthly meetings were held with the participating teachers, and a teacher inservice workshop was held. Parents were contacted individually and met as a group. Analysis of evaluation data revealed that although the follow-up surveys did not indicate significant change in teachers' attitudes, the retention rate of students dropped from 13 percent to less than 1 percent. Most of the students demonstrated improved skills; those who did not improve appeared to have significant learning problems and were referred for more intensive educational intervention. Significant attitudinal change was noted among the parents. Appendices provide, among various related materials, the teacher survey, a briefing paper on restructuring the primary grades, and detailed guides for teachers and parents on grade retention. The teachers' guide contains a policy brief on current practice and research evidence on repeating grades in school. Citations number 55. (RH)

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Decreasing the Incidence of First Grade Retention through a Diagnostic-Prescriptive Intervention Program and Teacher In-Service.

by

Elizabeth F. Carter

Cluster 29

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A Practicum II Report presented to the
Ed.D. Program in Early and Middle Childhood
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

NOVA UNIVERSITY

1990

PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

This practicum took place as described.

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This practicum report was submitted by Elizabeth F. Carter under the direction of the adviser listed below. It was submitted to the Ed.D. Program in Early and Middle Childhood and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova University.

Approved:

Date of Final Approval of Report

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ABSTRACT

Decreasing the Incidence of First Grade Retention through a Diagnostic-Prescriptive Intervention Program and Teacher In-Service. Carter, Elizabeth F., 1990: Practicum Report, Nova University, Ed.D. Program in Early and Middle Childhood. Descriptors: Grade Retention/Nonpromotion/School Failure/Academic Failure/Student Promotion/First Grade/Primary/Developmental Psychology/Gesell.

This practicum was intended to explore alternatives to grade retention for a group of first grade students through early identification, comprehensive individual psycho-educational evaluation, and formation of an individual diagnostic treatment-intervention plan. A second goal was to change the attitudes about retention of the students' first grade teachers and their parents through involvement in the plan and through in-service meetings.

The writer assisted the teachers with early identification of at-risk for retention students, performed the psycho-educational evaluations, and participated in the educational planning. She held monthly meetings with the teachers and provided an in-service meeting for them. She met with each of the parents and provided an evening meeting for them. At the end of the implementation, she administered follow-up evaluations on the students and obtained post-implementation surveys from the teachers and the parents.

The results of the practicum were positive. Analysis of the data revealed that although the follow-up surveys did not indicate a significant change in attitudes by the teachers, the retention rate dropped from 13% to less than 1% at the end of the year. Most of the students demonstrated improved skills and those who did not appeared to have significant learning problems and were referred for more intensive educational intervention. Significant attitudinal change was noted in the parents.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of the Community

School district Z is located in North Florida in a community of 176,000 people. This section of the state is not tropical and enjoys a mild but distinct change of seasons. The city is situated some 35 miles from the Gulf of Mexico in an area of rolling hills canopied by a variety of trees. It is considered to be an unusually clean and attractive town and several nationally distributed magazines have included it in their choice of the "top twenty" most desirable cities in the nation.

The per capita income in Z is only $13,388 annually, but unemployment is less than 3.4 percent and almost 95 percent of the residents work in non-agricultural jobs. The seemingly low per capita income is influenced by the almost 40,000 college students who live in the community, many holding lower paying part-time and temporary jobs. A positive factor is the relatively inexpensive cost of living in this community as compared with larger Florida cities and with towns of comparable size in other parts of the country (Florida Trend Yearbook, 1988).

The primary employers in the community are state government, two state universities, a sizable community college, and a large regional medical center. There are also many professional persons working in the private sector. The

yellow pages of the local telephone directory lists over 800 attorneys, more than 400 medical doctors, and hundreds of accountants, architects and engineers. In addition there are many college professors, public and private school teachers, and other professionals too numerous to mention. In short, Z is an affluent community with a well educated and upwardly mobile citizenry.

The school system in Z serves more than 28,000 students in grades Pre-K through 12 in 35 schools and programs. Elementary schools A and B are among those schools. Both have about 700 students and both are located in a relatively affluent section of the district. They serve a large suburban area where home values are in the $200,000 to $500,000 range as well as some more modest suburbs with homes beginning in the $60,000 range in value. They also have a very small population of minority students from depressed SES areas. Most of these minority students live in somewhat isolated "pocket" communities that were very rural 10 years ago, but that are now surrounded by affluent suburbs. Thus, the majority of the students in these schools are the children of upwardly mobile professionals, clerical and "blue-collar" workers, and a few families that are at the poverty level.

The Writer's Role

The writer is employed in district Z as a school psychologist. She has been employed as a school psychologist or school psychology coordinator for the past twenty years, fifteen of them in district Z. For the past seven years she has been

the school psychologist assigned to School A. School B is just opening this year and is also her assignment since many of the students in School B previously attended School A. Her job responsibilities include administering psychological evaluations to students who are referred to her for a variety of reasons. Among those referral reasons is the need to provide diagnostic information to assist the teacher, the school, and the parents in making decisions regarding grade retention.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

Despite an increasing awareness in the literature and in the Florida legislature that grade retention is expensive and ineffective as an academic intervention, many teachers remain convinced that it is beneficial for children who are not progressing academically or who are perceived as being developmentally immature. As a result, a number of children are informally targeted at the end of kindergarten and/or near the beginning of first grade for possible first grade retention. The research indicates that teachers are the primary decision-makers in these situations and that the recommendations are often made on the basis of subjective criteria (Carstens, 1985, Cadigan, Entwisle, Alexander, & Pallas, 1988,). Parents are then asked to confirm and agree to these recommendations with little real data to help them make decisions. As a result, they most often rely on the teacher's judgement and sometimes agree to a procedure that is not entirely comfortable for them.

During the past 10 years the writer has become increasingly concerned about grade retention for primary aged children. Since 1978, when District Z initiated a skills based pupil progression plan, she has observed that many of the students from grades three, four, and five who are referred to her for academic, social, behavioral, and/or emotional difficulties have been retained in the earlier grades, most often in first grade. Some of these referred students have IQ's in

the superior range but are a grade behind their cohorts because they were perceived earlier as being "immature".

The writer is also concerned that although grade retention appears to have a significant affect on a student's self-concept, academic progress, matriculation toward graduation, and adult life, there are no procedural safe-guards or due process mechanisms built into the decision-making process. In the long run, grade retention may be a more serious decision than is placement in an exceptional student education program, yet it is not given the same degree of consideration or legal protection (Germain & Merlo, 1985).

Concisely stated, the problem is that grade retention is not an appropriate educational option for young children and may result in long-reaching consequences. As a result, teachers and parents need to have more objective, data-based information to help them to make informed decisions.

Problem Documentation

In the spring of 1989, the writer asked the first grade teachers at school A to complete a survey about grade retention. All five of the teachers said that they had retained students. Lack of academic readiness was their primary reason for retention with immaturity and/or poor social development being second. All five were sure that grade retention is a viable educational alternative and were certain

that it is beneficial to children. The final question, "Do you feel that research supports retention?", was answered in the affirmative by all five.

During the first week of the 1989-90 school year the writer met with the 11 first grade teachers at schools A and B. She learned that the teachers at School A had recommended grade retention for 16 first grade students, or 12% of their population of 132 children. Since School B was not in existence last year, the four teachers who had taught first grade in other schools were polled. From a group of 96 first grade students 15 of them, or 16%, had been recommended for retention. Since Jackson (1975) calls a 9% retention rate "particularly high", these numbers were felt to be excessive.

Both School A and School B have initiated "Alternative Education" classes this year for fourth and fifth grade students who demonstrate behavior that is felt to be characteristic of later school drop-outs. This behavior may be exhibited by poor academic performance, social/emotional difficulties, school behavioral problems, or a combination of these factors. At School A, 14 students are participating in the program. Of that number, eight had been previously retained, six of them in first grade. At School B there are also 14 students in the program. Eleven of the students had been previously retained, eight of them in first grade.

What percent of first grade retention is acceptable? If, as research indicates, it is an inappropriate educational practice and, as the referral rate indicates, it is not a successful educational intervention, then any percent is too

high and certainly the 12 percent rate at School A and the projected 16% rate at School B is a cause for concern.

Causative Analysis

There are at least three probable causes of this problem. They include; the "back to basics" trend in education; the prevalence of the theories of the "maturational psychologists"; and the lack of truly individualized educational programs for young children.

The influence of the "back to basics" movement in education, driven by academic accountability concerns, has led many school districts, including District Z, to develop pupil progression plans that require students to master the material at each grade level before they can be promoted to the next grade (Elliget & Tocco, 1983, Leon County, 1978; Thompson, 1979). This enforces a standardized curriculum on children and requires them to master certain skills whether they are developmentally ready to do so or not.

Niklason (1984) found that the practice of grade retention is increasing due primarily to the "back-to-basics" movement and the trend toward mandated minimum competencies for promotion. Thompson (1979) notes that when minimum competency testing is put in place, the rate of grade retention rises dramatically. Holmes and Matthews (1984) state that after an accountability model was adopted, one county in Virginia retained 1,300 of their total population

of 3,750 students, or more than 35%. Smith and Shepard (1987) examined U.S Census Bureau data and found a significant increase in grade retention from 1975 to 1982. They estimated a retention rate ranging from 15% to 19% nation-wide. They compared this rate to other high retention countries such as Haiti and Sierra Leone and to low retention countries such as Japan which has a rate of less than 1%. In Florida, 28% of the students in grades Kindergarten through Three were held back during the 1987-88 school year (Schweers, 1989).

A second cause of the problem is that, despite the lack of supportive data, the theories of the "maturational psychologist", e.g. Gesell, Ilg & Ames, and others have been widely accepted by primary level teachers, most especially by many of the Primary Intervention Specialists. Advocates of Gesellian psychology believe that if a child is not "ready" to learn material, then retention (or postponement) until he or she has time to mature is the preferred solution (Gredler, 1980). Ames, Gillespie, Haines, and Ilg (1979) speak of the "superior-immature" child as one who may have good or even superior intelligence but is "young for his age". Their contention is that "regardless of birthday age or Intelligence Quotient, in most instances, a child does better in school if started and subsequently promoted on the basis of developmental age" (p.5). Methods of determining this "readiness" tend to be subjective and poorly documented however (May and Welch, 1984). For example, Ames et. al suggest that decisions regarding immaturity can be made by the examiner on the basis of "extensive clinical experience" which "tends to give the examiner a good feel for the difference" (p 179). Donofrio (1977) is a strong

supporter of the Gesell tests and feels that the next best opinion about readiness can be obtained from the teacher. He states that some children who are seen as immature "require the repetition of one or two grades, kindergarten and first". Kaufman and Kaufman (1973) quote the Gesell Institute as saying that two thirds of kindergarten graduates are not ready for first grade but point out that there is no empirical evidence to show that the Gesell Readiness Test is a good predictor of academic success. According to Shepard and Smith (1988) the developmental ages obtained on the Gessell Readiness Tests have a standard error of measurement of six months. Thus, for a five year old child there is a possibility that his developmental age is being overestimated or underestimated by a tenth of his life. In a recent court case involving the Norwood-Norfolk school district in New York state, parents of a child who was retained in a pre-kindergarten class on the basis of the Gesell test were helped by expert testimony against the test. The child was admitted to a regular kindergarten class. Still, it is estimated that 18% of the school districts in the nation use the test to help determine grade placement (Putka, 1988).

A third cause of the problem is that although all primary children in District Z go through an evaluative screening at the beginning of each year and are placed in a Primary Education Program "strategy" based on its outcome, the resulting intervention plans often do not seem to be meet the student's individual needs and are frequently not successful. The plans tend to have a "cookie cutter"

approach rather than being based on the specific, appropriately diagnosed, needs of the individual child.

The ten year old Primary Education Program which was designed to help students in grades kindergarten through third grade learn better, has come under close scrutiny by the Florida legislature (Tallahassee Democrat, 1989). Critics state that despite a cost of $720 million the Primary Education Program hasn't made much difference. Information on the PREP program was provided to a subcommittee of the Florida legislature in May of 1989 with a report that revealed that two thirds of Florida's 67 school districts failed to fully meet primary students individual needs. This documentation was obtained through two PREP studies done by the University of Florida and one done by the Senate Education Committee (Tallahassee Democrat, 1989). The House Education Committee was also informed that more than 17,000 children in Florida kindergartens were not promoted in 1988 (Tallahassee Democrat, 1989). In District Z, the 12% retention rate of first grade students in an affluent, middle class school, certainly suggests that some other interventions need to be explored.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

Grade retention, nonpromotion, being "held back", and "flunking" are all terms used to describe what occurs when a student is required to remain in the same grade for a second year. The question of whether or not this practice is a

valid and useful educational strategy is one that has been discussed for many years and that has generated a great deal of controversy in the literature.

According to Hess (1978) grade retention was commonly practiced in 16th century England but Bossing and Brien (1980), state that it did not begin in America until about 1840 when elementary students were first divided into eight different grade levels. By the end of the Civil War most urban schools separated their students by grade and had specific expectations for each level (Holmes & Matthew, 1984). After that time, retaining students was so prevalent that in the late 1800's and early 1900's every other student could expect to repeat at least one grade (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). Concern about the value of the practice began to grow however, and before 1930, five negative reports had been published on the subject. In one of them, the Elementary School Journal printed the results of a study conducted in Long Beach, California, during the 1927-28 school year. This study found that students who were promoted on a trial basis did much better than their peers who were retained (Klene & Branson, 1929).

During the 1930's interest in retention accelerated and several significant articles were written on the subject. In two of these early studies Caswell found that nonpromotion did not aid in the homogeneity of the ability levels in the classroom and Arthur agreed with Klene & Branson's findings that repeaters do not do better during a second year in a grade than their promoted peers. These findings were reinforced over subsequent years by reviews of the literature

conducted by Otto and Estes in 1960 and by Sister Josephine in 1962. Both found that retention had no real educational value (Dobbs & Neville, 1967).

In one of the most important studies done of the effects of grade retention, Jackson (1975) reviewed 158 sources of research literature published on this subject prior to 1975. His extensive review included 44 research studies, most of which had serious flaws in their design. His often quoted conclusions are that, "....those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade" (p 627). In 1984, Holmes and Matthews followed up on Jackson's work with a meta-analysis of 44 relevant studies. They found that, "Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently out-weighs positive outcomes" (p. 232). Niklason (1983) conducted a review of the literature from 1966 to March, 1983 using only those articles that were backed by empirical data. From the 59 sources that she reviewed, only ten concluded that retention is helpful to children.

From the 1930's to the 1960's the rate of retentions declined as educators, sensitive to the possible adverse effects of nonpromotion initiated policies of "social promotion" instead (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Beginning in the 1960's and prompted by declining student achievement on standardized tests, many school systems took a second look at their promotion/retention policies (Rose et.

al 1983) and in the past 10 years the rate of retentions nation-wide has risen steadily (Holmes & Matthews, 1984, Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Despite 60 years of research that does not support the educational efficacy of grade retention the practice continues and in recent years has increased. Why is this the case? The research literature indicates three major causes; the "Back to Basics" or minimum competencies movement in education, the "readiness" philosophies of the maturational psychologist, and the inappropriate curriculum in some primary classrooms.

The primary cause of the problem appears to be the "Back to Basics", and/or minimum competencies movement in education that, driven by academic accountability concerns, has led many school systems to develop pupil progression plans that require students to master the material at each grade level before they can be promoted to the next grade (Elliget & Tacco, 1983, Leon County, 1978, Niklason, 1984). When school systems move to a promotion policy that is contingent on mastery of certain minimum competencies, their retention rates increase (Thompson, 1979). By 1978, nineteen states had developed specific standards for promotion (Adler, 1978).

The literature does not support grade retention as an effective educational intervention however. Dobbs & Neville (1967) found that retention not only does not lead to more academic success, but that it may actually inhibit it. Bocks (1977) reviewed ten studies done between 1911 and 1956 on the effects of retention on academic achievement. He concludes that "the practice of

non-promotion, as a device to ensure greater mastery of elementary school subject matter, does not receive support from these research findings." Bocks also found that "a substantial number do poorer work the second time in the grade". Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe (1987) looked at the long-term effects of retention on academic achievement in the primary years. They state that although retained students may show a gain in the first year following the retention, most lost this superiority during the second year and all lost it during the third year. Overall, the research indicates that grade retention does not improve students academic achievement in the basic skills and should not be used for that purpose (Holmes, 1983).

Bossing and Brien (1980), in their literature review, found immaturity to be a major reason for grade retention but say that it does not receive support from research as being a sound one. Smith and Shepard (1987) see grade retention as one of the educational policies that does not work for young children perceived as being immature. They state that teachers often have "highly edited and selectively presented evidence that is cited by advocates of one or another ideology" that retention is beneficial to students (p 131). Further, a number of teachers have, what they call "nativist" beliefs about how children develop "readiness". The nativist view is that development is a physiological unfolding of a series of stages, governed by an internal timetable. These teachers feel that there is little that they can do for a child who is "unready". Those who subscribe to this viewpoint suggest that children should be allowed to "mark time" until their psychological "wave

frequency" is aligned with that of their peers (Donofrio, 1977). Carstens (1985) points out "the Gessellian theory of development is the only framework which openly addresses and recommends retention" (p.55). Gredler (1980) describes this resurfacing of the philosophies of the Gesellian psychologists as being "destructive" since their unproven theories are being used to make school promotion and retention decisions. In 1988, evidently in response to these types of criticisms, the Gesell Institute of Human Development issued a series of position papers titled, What We Stand For. These papers covered such issues as the purpose of Gesell assessments, the inappropriate uses of Gesell developmental assessments, and one entitled, Developmental Progression: Yes! Academic Retention: No! After reading the latter, the writer was unable to distinguish the difference between "developmental progression" and grade retention since both involved having children remain behind their peers.

Others of the maturational theorist such as DiPasquale, Moule, & Flewelling (1980), feel that there is a "birthdate effect" in that children who are chronologically younger than others are less ready to take on academic instruction. Smith and Shepard (1987) point out however, that no matter what month school begins, there will always be children in the class who are younger than others. Gredler (1980) agrees that these "young" children may have more school problems but asks why this occurs. Are they in a class that is structured for older children? He suggests that success in a learning situation with a variety of mental ages is linked to the provision of different kinds of instructional strategies and not to

chronological homogeneity. Even Piaget felt that (reading) readiness might not be related to chronological age or to mental age, but to individual differences in children. In a 1970 conversation, he stated that, "perhaps a little slowness is useful in developing the capacity to assimilate new concepts" (p. 31). In responding to the claims of the maturationalist, Brandt (1989) states that, "The best that they have to offer appeared to require a great deal of faith in the theory and little in the way of hard scientific evidence" (p.24).

A third cause, also pertaining to the primary grades, is the failure of primary education programs to offer developmentally appropriate instructional programs to young children. Smith and Shepard (1987) speak of the "downward movement of the school curriculum", or the escalating of academic demands. Skills that used to be taught in the first grade are now being taught in kindergarten while first graders are now expected to master material that was previously taught in second grade. This places undue emphasis on the acquisition of structured academic skills causing many children to "fail". They blame this escalation on a number of factors including the pervasiveness of preschools, the widespread availability of kindergartens, the accountability pressures in the later grades, and demands from middle-class parents that their children be taught more, sooner. The same authors (Shepard & Smith, 1988), point out that teachers tend to adjust their instruction to the level of the students in their room. If most of the children have come from a highly structured, academically oriented kindergarten, they will tend to provide the next level of instruction. Thus, the student who had a poor

kindergarten experience or who was not ready for that type of kindergarten instruction will continue to "fail". May and Welch (1984) examined young children who were developmentally placed based on the Gesell Screening Test. They found that the recommendations made were not compatible with an instructional program based on the student's particular needs. Koons (1977) in a sharp criticism of nonpromotion policies, states that students should not suffer for not being given appropriate instruction and points out that, "schools should be made to fit the students, not the students made to fit the schools" (p.701).

Brandt (1989) suggests that another cause is linked to societal factors. In an article in the NASP Communique', he suggests that other, unexplored, aspects of the promotion-retention controversy are the political, social, and motivational factors that determine who is retained. He recommends looking more closely at nonpromoted students to determine their common characteristics since identification of such commonalties might be helpful in designing strategies to avoid retention. These characteristics include gender, date of birth, race, socio-economic status, geographical location, and behavior, among others.

According to Bossing and Brien (1980), boys are retained twice as often as girls, children with behavioral and emotional problems are more likely to be retained, and students who live in the south or east are more commonly retained than those who live in the north or west (p. 13). Smith and Shepard (1987) also found males more likely to be retained as did Donofrio (1977), and Caplan (1973). Abidin, Golladay and Howerton (1971) state that low SES children from broken

homes who are also minorities are the most likely to be retained. Cadigan, et. al (1988) say that although school systems may say that retention decisions are made on objective criteria, in reality, age, race, sex, and the teacher's opinion are what count. Finally, Rose, et. al (1983) state that retention is sometimes used as a "motivator". There are those educators who subscribe to the theory that children will not learn unless the threat of failure is hanging over them. Thus, nonpromotion is used as a punishment for being "lazy" or slow to learn.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Statement of Goals

The writer had three general goals in examining this problem. The first was to increase the fund of information available to first grade teachers, PREP specialists, and the parents of first grade students were at-risk for nonpromotion about the practice of grade retention and its' possible outcomes.

The second goal was to develop an individualized assessment/treatment plan for each student in a group of first grade students from each school who had been identified as "at-risk" for nonpromotion that would not only benefit the specific children involved, but that could also be used as a model for an alternative to grade retention in the future.

Through implementation of the objectives for the first two goals, a third goal was to decrease the number of first grade students who were retained in schools A and B for the 1990-91 school year.

Statement of Objectives, Performance Standards, and Assessment Methods

For goal one, increasing information available to first grade teachers, PREP specialists and parents about nonpromotion, a specific objective was to have the teachers and the PREP specialists' demonstrate a measurable difference in the amount of information that they had about grade retention. For this purpose,

they were to attend a workshop where the literature on nonpromotion would be reviewed and the positive and negative aspects of the practice would be discussed.

The degree of success was to be measured by written questionnaires about grade retention that were to be completed by the teachers at the beginning and at the end of the implementation period. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) had 4 items, 2 of them sought factual data, e.g., "Did you retain any students during the 1988-89 school year?". The other two were significant to this project, "Do you feel that grade retention is beneficial to children?", and "Do you feel that research supports grade retention as a positive educational alternative?".

The standard of achievement for this objective was to be a significant change noted in the first grade teachers' information about grade retention demonstrated by comparison of their post-implementation questionnaires responses with their pre-implementation responses. At the end of the implementation period, 95 percent of the teachers and PREP specialists were expected to respond to these questions in the negative.

A second objective for goal one was for the parents of a group of first grade children who had been targeted as "at-risk" for nonpromotion to demonstrate significant change in their information about grade retention. To meet this objective, they were attend a conference with the writer and the teacher where their child's progress, educational program and recommendations for an individual educational plan would be discussed.

To measure this objective, the parents would be asked to complete a brief written survey regarding their beliefs about grade retention at the end of the conference (Appendix B). A second survey would be provided to them at the end of the implementation period. The standard of achievement was to be any positive change in the parents beliefs about grade retention as measured by their pre-intervention and post-intervention responses.

The second goal was to develop an individualized assessment/treatment plan for each student in a group of first grade students from each school who had been identified as "at-risk" for nonpromotion that would not only benefit the specific children involved, but that could also be used as a model for an alternative to grade retention in the future.

An objective for this goal was to be a demonstration of a significant increase in the level of basic skills that these children had obtained at the end of the implementation period. The expected rate of skill improvement was to be determined by comparing the cognitive, visual-spatial, motor expressive, and conceptual maturity scores of these students with their level of academic functioning.

This objective was to be measured by a comparison of the baseline assessment data and the follow-up assessment data for the targeted groups of children. This data would be obtained from standardized, objective instruments such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised, the Bender Gestalt Motor Test, the Draw A Person Test, the Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised,

and the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, and the same instruments would be used for both the pre-implementation and the post-implementation measure.

This objective would be met if the targeted first grade students demonstrated skills acquisition that was appropriate to their age and level of functioning. Thus, children whose cognitive skills were within the average range would be expected to achieve at least at the 50% on the academic follow-up tests.

A second objective for this goal was for the first grade teachers in Schools A and B to have assisted in developing and implementing individual instructional plans for each the targeted students. These plans were to be developed by using diagnostic data provided by the writer that had been obtained from individual assessments on each of the students and through conferences, written recommendations, and monitoring of the students progress.

The standard of achievement was to be that the permanent record of each of these children would contain a written individualized educational plan, that this plan would show evidence of how and when it was implemented and monitored, and that there would be written evidence of a group or team decision regarding promotion or retention having been made before the beginning of the 1990-91 school year.

The third goal, decreasing the number of first grade students who were retained in schools A and B for the 1990-91 school year, was to be achieved through the implementation of the first two goals. The objective for this goal was

to decrease the incidence of first grade students who were recommended for grade retention for the 1990-91 school year in the target schools from 12 to 16 percent to zero percent.

This objective was to be measured by comparison of the percentage of students recommended for first grade retention at school A and by the first grade teachers at school B (which did not exist last year) for the 1989-90 school year with the percentage of first grade students recommended for nonpromotion at the end of the 1989-90 school year in these two schools.

This objective would be met if the number of first grade students who are retained at the end of the 1989-90 school year (including the 1990 Summer Session) was decreased to no more than two percent of the total first grade population in both schools.

Analysis of Results

The results of this practicum were be analyzed by use of simple statistical comparisons of the outcome data with the baseline information. The success of the implementation was to be measured by whether or not the objectives had been achieved.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Possible Solutions

During the 1989 Florida legislative session a bill was introduced that read as follows:

> "Beginning July 1, 1990, a student shall not be retained in the same grade or placed in a transitional class before reaching third grade. Exceptions to this policy shall occur only when such decision is deemed in the best interest of the student, the nonpromotion has been approved by the school staffing committee required pursuant to s.230.2312, and the student has been provided with opportunities such as, but not limited to, summer school attendance, supplemental instruction, tutoring, and other intensive help to assist the student in making successful progress through the primary grades" (Friedman, 1989, p.11).

The proposed legislation went on to encourage, but not to require, that school districts restructure grades kindergarten through three into a primary unit "through which students may make continuous progress" (p. 5). This bill did not pass during the 1989 session.

During the 1990 legislative session the Committee on Education, chaired by Representative Michael Friedman, again proposed legislation aimed at restructuring the primary grades. CS/HB 931, the Education Reform Act of 1990, passed both the House and the Senate on the final night of the legislative session. The bill encouraged but did not mandate "the development of innovative programs in the elementary grades to reduce the number of young children who

are not successful learners and who are "failed" or not promoted to the next grade" (Friedman, 1990 p. 1).

This solution to the grade retention dilemma for young students, one that is also recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1988), is the most ambitious and also the most expensive and difficult to implement. At present there are seven school districts in Florida that have elected to develop pilot programs for continuous education for students in grades kindergarten through five. Hopefully these programs will be successful and will encourage other districts to emulate them. It is also hoped that more stringent legislation along with adequate appropriations for funding these programs will be forthcoming.

Since this ideal solution is unlikely to gain widespread acceptance in the foreseeable future, other options must be explored and a variety of alternatives to grade retention are suggested in the literature. Bossing and Brien (1980) looked at the ways in which a number of different school systems had addressed their retention problems. In Greenville County, Virginia, for example, students who were not achieving up to competency standards could be assigned to a "split grade" or "half step" promotion. There, students of the same age and achievement level would be grouped to improve their achievement levels and earn promotion to the next full grade. Not only do the students not repeat a grade with younger children, they also do not use the same educational materials or strategies for a second time. While this counties' data indicates that achievement test scores have

improved since this program was implemented, Niklason (1984) points out that test results for the retained children were not reported separately and that the retained students were not compared with other low functioning students who had not been retained (p.490). The value that such a class or classes might have would be questionable since creating homogeneous groups of low achieving students has not been shown to be effective in the past. Other concerns would include unfair discrimination against specific groups, "tracking", and failure to provide positive role models. In addition, Greenville County is a small school system. The logistics of setting this type of program in place in a larger district would be very difficult.

In his review of the research on promotion and retention, Haddad (1979) states that, at this point in time, the question is no longer whether "to promote or not promote", but how to achieve academic success and how to prevent academic failure. He suggests that nongraded curriculums, ability grouping, and a new role for educational measurement may help to provide solutions. He also notes that the "age averages of attainment" seem to keep rising resulting in more children who fail to meet them. He suggests that this can be solved by controlling the entrance age or by modifying the promotion standards so that they are really in line with the actual age of the students who are expected to meet them. Another of his suggestions is to group repeaters in a special program and to introduce the material of the next grade while also providing remediation for the work not passed in the former grade. His initial solutions seem to be valid ones and reflect recommendations made by others such as Dobbs and Neaville (1967). Most school

systems would argue however, that they do use realistic "age of attainment" standards and Florida has already raised the school entrance age with no noticeable change in the number of primary students who are not coping with the curriculum, regardless of their age. The suggestion to group repeaters together is replete with the same problems noted in the Greenville County, Virginia program. It also seems unrealistic to expect students who were unable to master material at one grade level to not only master it on second presentation but to also be learning more advanced skills at the same time.

Among the other solutions that Bossing and Brien (1980) explore are non-graded programs, "transitional maturity" classes and individualized instruction. They also point out that there is a need for in-service programs for teachers to inform them about the research on this subject and with the alternatives to retention. A position that the writer supports and feels is applicable to her situation. Germain and Merlo (1985) recommend similar alternatives such as non-graded classrooms, transition classrooms, special education services, and individualized instruction. They note that decisions to retain students are not given the same systematic process as are decisions to place children in special education and that often parent permission is not even required. They feel that if school systems are going to retain students they should have formal retention policies.

Haddad (1979) suggests that educational measurement can play a new role in responding to the retention/promotion question by estimating the rate of learning, diagnosing the effectiveness of instructional methods, analyzing the

appropriateness of the materials, and introducing needed improvements. Schultz (1989) agrees that measurement is crucial to the development of more individualized curriculum but suggests that it should use alternative methods in order to built a richer picture of individual children. Educational measurement is a viable tool for assisting in student success and the mechanisms for doing so are already in place in most school systems including district Z.

After a comprehensive review of the research, Carstens (1985) maintains that answers to the retention/promotion dilemma can be found by examining the organizational structure of schools and the strategies for instruction. Shepard and Smith (1988) also speak of the importance of having schools that have a commitment to meeting the needs of individual children and a willingness to adapting their curriculum and their instructional practices accordingly. Gredler (1980) confirms that the at-risk for retention student needs "an active, on-going program that is pointed toward the specific educational problems diagnosed" and recommends a diagnostic-prescriptive strategy (11).

If a diagnostic-prescriptive strategy supported by appropriate education measurement and leading to an individualized instructional program is the solution of choice, then when, how, and by whom should it be implemented?

One of the commonly held myths about retention is that it should be done early to avoid social and emotional problems and before academic deficits became too pronounced. This myth has been perpetrated by researchers such as Finlayson (1977), and Sandoval and Hughes (1981) as well as by the maturational theorists.

Finlayson compared the self-concept scores of nonpromoted first grade students with those who had been promoted and found significant improvement during the first year after the retention occurred. During the second year of the study, the self-concept scores of the promoted students and that of the retained students were almost identical. Thus, he concluded that grade retention does not negatively affect the self-concepts of young children. Niklason (1984) is critical of Finlayson's finding since he failed to account for regression to the mean. She also notes that the retained students had the poorer self-concepts to begin with which made them almost certain to show some improvement. Yamamoto (1980) in a study of what kinds of events stress children, found that while parents and teachers may feel that retention does not lower self-concept, the children themselves rank it third in stressful life events, right after losing a parent or going blind.

Sandoval and Hughes (1981) were interested in identifying the commonalties among first grade children who were at-risk for grade retention. They studied 146 children; 62 of whom were promoted despite having difficulties and 84 of whom were retained. Twenty-nine of the retained children showed improvement in all areas except math. They conclude that "nonpromotion can be positive experience for some children" (p. 151). On the contrary, Dobbs and Neville (1967) also studied two groups of first grade at-risk for retention students and found that retention was not useful in increasing achievement.

Niklason (1984) was also interested in isolating characteristics that identify first grade children who are at-risk for retention and she too studied two groups of "recommended-for-retention" students. She found the diversity between the two groups to be too broad to determine specific characteristics since who is retained depends so much on the school district, the teacher, and the parents. She did find however, that many of the retained children were already achieving academically at their expected levels.

Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe (1987) in a longitudinal study of the impact on academic progress made by promotion and retention decisions agreed with findings that retention is not in the best interest of first-grade students. They also debunked the myth that early retention is best by finding that the first grade retainees lost their advantage over promoted students by the second grade in math and by the third grade in reading and language (p.116).

In Best Practices in School Psychology (1985), Germain and Merlo state that "The research fairly consistently supports the conclusion that it is better to retain children earlier rather than late in their school career" (p. 175). In 1988, the National Association of School Psychologists reversed this opinion and issued a position statement that retention of students is "in large measure not substantiated by sound research". Further, the position statement says that, "The cumulative evidence indicates that retention decisions cannot be validated using any standardized or competency-based tests and that retention can negatively affect achievement and social/emotional adjustment" (p.18). Despite the fact that

research does not support early retention as being more helpful that at any other time, the highest rate of nonpromotion still occurs in the first grade (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983).

Perhaps the good but misguided intentions that make educators feel that early retention will help children is a result of their experience that if some type of intervention is not begun early, it is unlikely to be successful. Haddad (1979) notes that the levels of achievement that a child can be expected to obtain in the primary grades can be predicted in first grade. Peterson, et al (1987) report that policy in the Mesa Public Schools state that any student being considered for retention must be identified by the end of the first semester of the school year. Entwisle, Alexander, Cadigan and Pallas, (1986) studied the process of educational attainment for first graders and found that "once children's achievement trajectories are established, there is a high degree of continuity from that point forward" (p.604). In an effort to identify the factors that determine promotion and retention decisions in first grade, these same authors (Cadigan, Entwisle, Alexander & Pallas, 1988) found that the best two indicators of future retention could be measured by the end of the first marking period in first grade. They were; being identified in kindergarten as being at risk, and failing reading in the first quarter of the first grade. The authors point out that the advantage of being able to identify these students early is that they still have time to be provided with intensive reading readiness experiences. Finally, Cadigan, et. al state that the

factors that determine whether or not a first grade student will be promoted are mainly related to teacher judgements of the child.

Having established that more first grade students are retained than any other grade level, that these at-risk students can be identified by the end of the first semester of first grade or earlier, and that educational intervention to be effective must be begun early, then whose job is it to identify and initiate treatment for these children?

According to Taylor (1978) it is the teachers job to be first in identifying and correcting problems in student achievement. If she is not successful, she should call upon other resources and personnel that are available in the system. DiPasquale, et al (1980) suggests that children at-risk for nonpromotion can be found among those who have been referred for psychological assessment. That the teacher, through the act of making the referral indicates that the child is having a significant amount of difficulty. Gredler (1988) cautions however, that psychological referrals sometimes are a reflection of the teachers' perceptions and may not target the right children. In a National Association of School Psychologists supporting paper on retention, Rafoth, Dawson, and Carey (1988) urge school psychologists to become involved in retention/promotion decisions by becoming familiar with the data base on the subject, sharing this knowledge with other educators, and by promoting alternatives to retention. The NASP Position Statement on Student Retention (1988) resolved to encourage early identification and intervention, encourage interventions other than retention, promote and

publicize research on the subject, and encourage school psychologists to get involved in the decision-making process (p.18). Rose, et. al (1983) sees the school psychologist as playing a key role in identifying at-risk students, in developing alternative educational programs for them, and in teacher and parent consultation. Thus, the review of the literature suggests that the solutions to the retention/promotion dilemma lie in teacher in-service, early identification of at-risk students, a diagnostic and prescriptive approach to intervention, and the implementation of developmentally appropriate individualized instruction. It further indicates that the teacher is the first resource followed by the school psychologist.

If the school psychologist assumes the responsibility of helping teachers to understand the consequences of grade retention, of identifying children who are at-risk and of being involved in planning educational interventions for them, how does she begin?

Description of Selected Solutions

The writer's solutions were based primarily on the recommendations made by the National Association of School Psychologists supporting paper on retention (Rafoth, Dawson, & Carey, 1988). She performed an extensive review of the literature in order to become familiar with the data base on the subject; she shared this information through written materials and through in-service meetings

with teachers and other educators; she worked with the teachers to identify early those students who were considered to be at-risk for retention; she developed an educational intervention plan for each student based on individual evaluation and diagnosis; and she involved the parents of the at-risk students in both the educational planning and in in-service activities to give them information about grade retention. The writer chose first grade because the research indicates that this is the grade level where students are most often retained (DiPasquale, et. al, 1980; Niklason, 1987; Rose, et. al, 1983). This is also the grade level where more students have been retained in School A in the past.

Although a number of studies (Dobbs & Neville, 1967; Rose, et. al., 1983; Shepard & Smith, 1988) recommended a diagnostic and prescriptive approach to first grade retention, the writer did not find any references to actual studies that used this type of intervention plan. She felt that it would be the most appropriate solution in her situation because it would involve the teachers and the PREP specialists in the intervention strategy, because it would be a "show me" and not a "tell me" approach and because the writer and these educators shared a belief in the efficacy of developmentally appropriate individualized instruction. The other solutions that were suggested by the research literature seemed to be either too idealistic, too expensive, or too far beyond the writers purview to be possible and/or effective at this time.

Report of Action Taken

The solution strategies began with a meeting between the writer and the first grade teachers and PREP specialists in Schools A and B. During this meeting the writer explained her concerns about grade retention and her desire to assist the teachers in identifying students who were at-risk so that the writer and the teachers could work together to try to decrease the incidence of nonpromotion. The writer asked for feed-back from the teachers and had them complete the preintervention survey regarding their past practice of retaining students, their opinions about grade retention as an educational alternative, and their beliefs about the support for nonpromotion in the research literature (Appendix A). She asked them to provide her with the names of the students that they considered to be at-risk by the end of the first semester of the 1989-90 school year since research indicates that at-risk for retention students can usually be identified by this time (Cadigan, et. al, 1988; Entwisle, et. al, 1987; Haddad, 1979; Peterson, et. al, 1987,). She also provided them with the names of the first grade students who had scored below the 25th percentile on a school wide, group administered, abilities test that the children took during the second month of school.

As the names of the at-risk students were received by the writer, she observed them in several settings in the school, reviewed their cumulative files to obtain information about their kindergarten progress, previous test scores, health information, and checked the results of their sensory screenings. As the at-risk

students were identified, the writer telephoned their parents to explain her project and to ask them for permission to involve their child. The parents were not told that their child was being considered to be at-risk for retention at this point since it was felt that this would be premature and might make the parents feel that the teacher had a self-fulfilling prophecy for their child. They were told that the writer was interested in learning more about how to help first-graders learn and to determine if a psycho-educational evaluation could be useful in helping teachers to develop better instructional plans for them. After the telephone conversation, a letter was sent with the permission forms (Appendix B).

Most of the parents responded positively to the request for permission to evaluate and, as parent permission was received, the writer began to perform the psyco-educational evaluations. The evaluations consisted of the administration of at least the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised, for level of intellectual functioning, the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Academic Achievement: Reading and Math Clusters, or the Bracken Basic Concept Scale: School Readiness Composite, for academic achievement, the Draw-A-Person Test, (Negiri scoring, Koppitz and Harris for analysis), and the Bender Gestalt Motor Test for Young Children, (Koppitz scoring). Other instruments such as the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery: Cognitive, the entire Bracken Basic Concepts Scale, and/or the Visual-Motor Integration Test were also used in some cases for further diagnosis of learning style. The writer chose these tests because they were appropriate for children of this age, they were

familiar to and highly accepted by the teachers in Schools A and B, and they were tests which have been shown to have a satisfactory amount of reliability and validity for use in this type of situation.

The writer then determined an expectancy age for each student based on their scores on the initial battery of tests, compared their expectancy with their current level of academic functioning, and attempted to identify areas of strength and weaknesses that could be used in developing the individual educational plan. A written report was prepared and shared with the teacher, the PREP specialist, and the parents at a conference at the school. A written individual instructional plan was also initiated at that time (Appendix C).

The writer monitored each targeted student throughout the remainder of the 1989-90 school year and assisted the parents, teachers, and PREP specialists in selecting and obtaining appropriate supportive and remedial services for the students. She also had at least one monthly conference with the teacher individually and at least one monthly conference with the first grade teachers as a group. She performed periodic reassessments, frequent observations, and consulted with the teachers and parents as needed.

During the second semester, the writer held a workshop for the first grade teachers and PREP specialists at Schools A and B. At that time they were brought up-to-date on the overall progress of the project and a booklet developed from the research literature about retention was distributed (Appendix D). The teachers

and PREP specialists were given an opportunity to share their input about nonpromotion in general and about the results of the project in particular.

In May, the writer held an evening meeting with the parents of students in the project that was also open to other interested persons in the community (Appendix E). The writer gave a presentation on the pros and cons of grade retention and gave each parent a booklet on the subject prepared from the research literature (Appendix H). They were also given an opportunity to sign up to receive copies of specific information that was not distributed at the meeting. The parents in attendance were asked to complete a survey form at the beginning of the meeting and another at the end regarding their opinions about grade retention before and after the presentation (Appendix F).

Near the end of the school year the writer began to perform the follow-up assessments on the targeted students. The terminal assessments consisted of the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, Academic: Reading and Math Clusters, the Bender Gestalt Motor Test of Young Children, and the Draw-A-Person Test among others. Final assessment scores were then compared with the initial evaluation to obtain the rate of growth and achievement and a written report was mailed to the parents. For those students who had not achieved their First Grade Key Skills, summer school was recommended and their final evaluations were completed during the last week of summer school.

Decisions regarding retention were made by the end of the year for 18 of the children and by the beginning of the following school year for the 12 who

attended Summer School. Teachers and parents were encouraged to consider not only the final achievement scores, but also the amount of achievement when compared with the student's expected level of functioning.

At the end of the school year, the PREP specialists and first grade teachers were asked to complete the post-implementation survey to assist the writer in determining what changes, if any, had occurred in their beliefs about grade retention as a result of their participation in this project.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

The writer had three general goals in examining this problem. The first was to increase the fund of information available to first grade teachers, PREP specialists, and parents about the practice of grade retention and its possible outcomes. A specific objective was to have the teachers and the PREP specialists' demonstrate a measurable difference in the amount of information that they had about grade retention as a result of being involved in this project. To measure the success of this objective it was hoped that 95% of them would respond in the negative to the last two questions on the teacher survey, "Do you feel that grade retention is beneficial to children?", and "Do you feel that research supports grade retention as a positive educational alternative?"

This objective was not met. The pre-implementation surveys from the eleven teachers had indicated that 100% of them felt that grade retention was beneficial to children and that this belief was supported by research. The postimplementation surveys revealed that 75% of them still saw retention as being beneficial and 54% of them continued to feel that it was supported by research. While some attitudinal change was present, it was not as great as the writer had hoped it would be.

A second objective for this goal was to have the parents of a group of first grade children who had been targeted as at-risk for nonpromotion to demonstrate a significant change in their information about grade retention. To measure this objective the parents who attended the evening workshop on grade retention were given pre and post surveys. Only the last two questions, "Would you consider retaining your first grader?" and "Do you feel that grade retention is beneficial to children?" were significant to measure this objective. Any positive change in the parents beliefs about grade retention would be considered an indication of success.

This objective for this goal was met. Of the 27 respondents, 81% answered that they would consider retaining their first grader before the meeting, only 50% said that they would do so afterwards. Before the meeting 87% felt that grade retention was beneficial while after the meeting only 42% saw it as helpful.

A second goal was to develop an individualized assessment and treatment plan for each student in the project. An objective for this goal was to demonstrate a significant increase in the level of basis skills that these children had obtained at the end of the implementation period as measured by comparison of the baseline assessment date and the follow-up assessment date. This objective would be met if each child demonstrated basic skills that were appropriate to his or her age and level of cognitive functioning before the beginning of the 1990-91 school year.

The goal was partially met in that an individualized assessment and treatment plan was developed for each student in the project. The first objective

was not met however, since not every student demonstrated an increase in basic skills by the beginning of the following school year.

At the end of the first semester of the 1989-90 school year, the writer had received 17 names from School A and 19 names from School B for a total of 36 referred students. The first grade population at School A was 133 and the first grade population at School B was 121. Thus, 13% of the first graders at School A and 16% of the first graders at School B were seen as being at-risk for retention. These numbers were commensurate with the retention rates of the previous school year. Table 1.

FIRST GRADE STUDENTS

RECOMMENDED FOR RETENTION

	1989-90	% of Total 1st Grade Population
School A	17	13%
School B	19	16%
TOTAL	36	14%

	1988-89	% of Total 1st Grade Population
School A	16	12%
School B	15	16%
TOTAL	31	13.5%

TABLE 1

Of the 36 referred students, 20 were male and 16 were female. Boys represented 51% of the students in the first grade but were 55% of the referral population. There were 25 Black students in the first grade in the two schools which represents .09 % of the total population. There were 10 Black students in the referred group which represents 40% of the total. Table 2.

CHARACTERISTICS OF REFERRED STUDENTS BY SEX AND RACE

	# Ref.	% of 1st Graders	% of Referred Group
Boys	20	51%	55%
Girls	16	49%	45%
Black	10	9%	40%
White	26	91%	60%

TABLE 2

Since Florida requires that children must be five years of age on or before August 31 to attend school for that school year, the oldest students in the referred group were those whose birthdates fell in the first quarter of the school year, e.g. September lst through November 31st. The youngest students were those born between June lst and August 31st. Of the referred students, 12 had birthdates in the "youngest" quarter and 14 had birthdates in the "next to youngest" quarter (e.g. March lst through May 31st). The other 10 represented the "older" half of the year and had birthdays between September first and April first. Table 3.

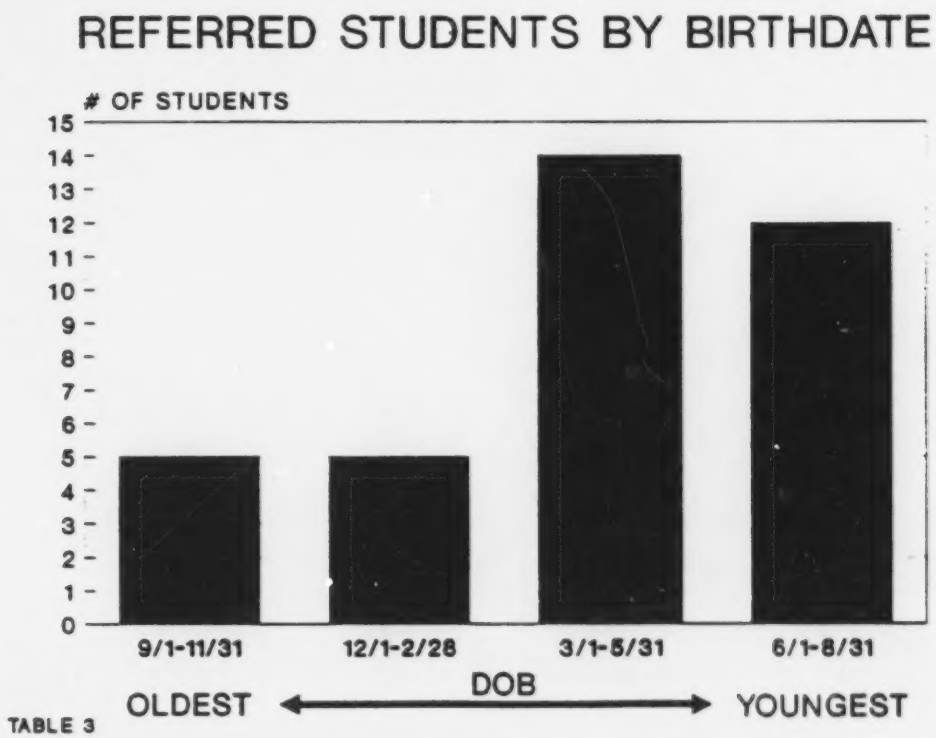

TABLE 3

According to the referral reasons given by the teachers, 28 of the children were perceived as being academically deficit. Seven were seen as having significant behavioral problems that were interfering with learning, and one child was included because her parents had already indicated to the teacher that they planned to retain her because she was "developmentally young".

Of the 36 children who were referred, one parent refused to grant permission, one parent did not follow through after agreeing to do so, and four of the referred students withdrew from school before their parents were contacted. As a result, the writer had a total number of 30 students in the project.

After the initial individual assessments were completed, the writer found that 16 of the students in the project had academic skills that were within expectancy, 10 demonstrated no processing weaknesses of any kind and five had no deficits in any area. Fourteen of the students did exhibit achievement below expectancy in reading, 14 were below expectancy in math, and 11 were deficit in both of these academic areas. Eleven of them demonstrated some delay in visual-motor skills and another 11 had significant attention problems. Table 4.

ACADEMIC AND PROCESSING DEFICITS OF STUDENTS IN PROJECT

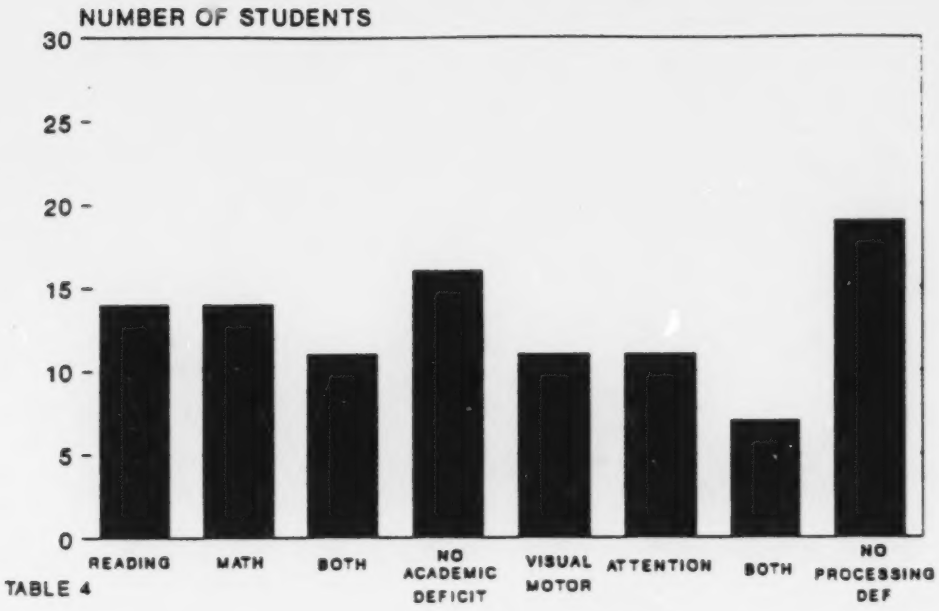

TABLE 4

The IQ's of the children ranged from 81 to 138 with the median score being 105. Eight of the children achieved IQ scores within the superior range while three appeared to be functioning within the low average range.

The evaluations were completed and the individual educational plans were in place for the 30 subjects by mid-March. The 18 students who had achieved their First Grade Key Skills were reevaluated during the last week of school. The 12 who had to attend summer school were evaluated the last week of the summer session. Since the initial evaluations were begun at the end of the first semester, the length of the implementation period varied. Some students who were tested early and attended summer school had 22 weeks of intervention. Others who were tested later and who did not attend summer school had only 10 weeks of

intervention. Based on the teachers recommendations, the writer did attempt to obtain parent permission and evaluate first those children who were perceived as being most at-risk.

The results from the final evaluation were compared with the baseline information to determine whether the students' reading and math skills had increased, decreased, or stayed at the same level when compared with their expectancy. Standard scores were used to account for the increase in chronological age. Of the 30 subjects, 25 showed either expectancy-appropriate or improved scores in reading. Five students did not improve or stayed at the same skill level in reading. Twenty three of the students demonstrated math scores that were either improved or had increased commensurate with their increase in age. Seven students scored lower in math on the second testing. These low scores in reading and math were obtained by only eight individual students since four students were low in both reading and math. Table 5. All 16 of the children who were not shown to be academically deficit after the first testing continued to gain skills at an appropriate rate. Of the 14 who were academically deficit, 8 did not demonstrate any improvement.

A second objective for the goal of developing an individualized assessment/treatment plan for each of the students was to have all of the first grade teachers in Schools A and B assist in developing and implementing

COMPARISON OF ACADEMIC RESULTS
PRE AND POST IMPLEMENTATION

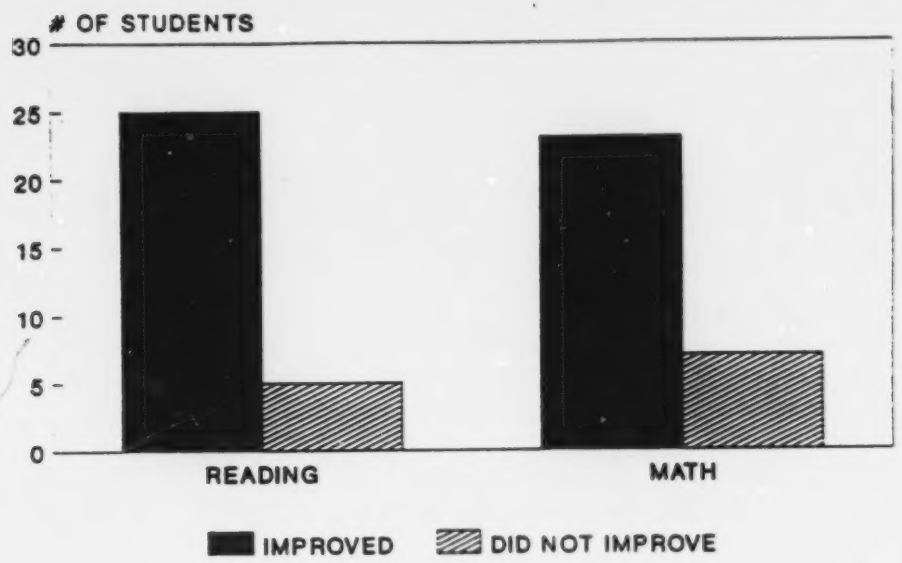

TABLE 6

individual instructional plans for each of the targeted students. This objective was met. The permanent records of each of the 30 students now contains a written individualized education plan developed by the writer and the teacher. There is also written evidence of a Child Study Team decision regarding promotion and/or retention as well as recommendations for other educational options such as class placement and/or further evaluation for exceptional student education programs.

The third goal was to decrease the number of first grade students who were retained in Schools A and B. The first objective, to decrease the incidence of first grade students recommended for retention to zero percent was achieved for only one school. School A did not retain any of their first grade students but School B recommended retention for one and accepted the parents request to retain another. From a first grade population of 254, two retentions is only .008%. Thus

the final objective, to decrease the retention rate to no more than two percent of the total first grade population in both schools, was met. Table 6.

FIRST GRADE STUDENTS

RETAINED FOR 1990-91

		% of Total 1st Grade Population
School A	0	0%
School B	2	16%
TOTAL	2	.008%

TABLE 6

It should be noted that the eight students who were significantly below expectancy in their academic skills and who did not demonstrate growth also exhibited serious processing problems. Five of them had significant difficulties in visual attention, two had problems in auditory attention, and one was low in visual spatial skills. All of these students appeared to meet eligibility requirements for a specific learning disabilities program and were referred to the Child Study Team for further action. Thus 26% of the referred students seemed to be in need of a more intensive education intervention. Five of the referred students had IQ scores above the 95th percentile. The Child Study Team recommended that they be considered for placement in a gifted program. Overall, 13, or 43% of the referred

students needed education interventions beyond those provided in the regular classroom.

The processing deficits most often seen were auditory attention (11) and visual-motor immaturity (11). Eight students demonstrated visual attention deficits but three of them were at an appropriate level academically. Of the 11 with auditory attention problems, only two were academically deficit as well. Of the 11 with visual-motor immaturity, three were also academically below expectancy.

Of the eight students who appeared to have significant learning problems, all were born between September 1st and March 31st and were the "oldest" in the group. Of the five who seemed to be functioning within the gifted range, three were in the "youngest" group. Those three had been referred initially for "immature behavior".

CONCLUSIONS

Given an opportunity to select students at risk for retention before the end of the first semester of first grade, 11 teachers referred a total of 36 children. The population referred by these teachers had characteristics that were commensurate with those described in the research. As noted by Bossing and Brien (1980), and Smith and Shepard (1987), more boys were referred than girls. They had also found the proportion of blacks considered as at-risk to the number of blacks in the total school population to be high. The higher referral rate of the younger children suggests that the teachers may have been influenced by proponents of the

"birthdate effect" such as DiPasquale, Moule, & Flewwelling (1980) and Donofrio (1977). The fact that three of the youngest group, all of whom were referred for "immature behavior", had IQ's in the gifted range may indicate that these youngsters were perceived as being the "super-immature child" discussed by Ames, Gillespie, et. al. (1979). Weak academic skills and immature behavior were the two primary referral reasons. This is consistent with the findings of Niklason (1980), Jackson (1975) and Lehr (1982). The fact that the majority of the children recommended for retention were already achieving academically at expected levels was also reported by Niklason. The high incidence of attention problems, both visual and auditory, among the referred students seems to confirm the opinions of Kantrowitz and Wingert (1989) that some teachers may need to review what is an appropriate expectation for the on-task behavior of a six year old.

Over one quarter of the referred children had significant learning problems and, because of early identification and evaluation, have also been referred for a more comprehensive program next year. Five intellectually gifted, but highly active, youngsters will also be exposed to a more challenging curriculum as a result of their referral to this project. Finally, despite their survey responses about their opinions about grade retention, only one child was recommended for retention by her teacher and the first grade retention rate in these two schools was reduced to less than one percent. It should be noted that the two students who could not be included in the project because of lack of parental permission were also promoted although they were both weak in basic skills.

The parents of children in the project, parents of other first grade students in Schools A and B, and to some extent, parents in the community, seemed to benefit from the project. Forty seven persons attended the evening meeting on grade retention, 20 of whom were not involved in the project. In addition, the writer received a number of requests for materials from persons who were unable to attend the meeting. Several of these request originated from private school faculty.

Since this was not an experimental study and no control group was used, it is impossible to predict how the 30 students would have fared without the intervention. The writer would assume that the 16 who were not academically deficit would have continued to progress but she hopes that the other 14 have benefitted from their involvement with the project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the behavior of the first grade teachers suggests that a significant attitudinal change may have occurred, their survey responses did not support it. This is contrary to Doyles findings (1989). He presented factual information about grade retention to four different audiences; 23 teachers, 8 parents, 23 members of a Rotary Club. and 32 undergraduate education majors. His findings suggested that it is easier to convince teachers that retention is harmful than it is to persuade them to stop doing it (p.219). Conversely, the writer seems to have had more success in persuading them not to retain than in changing their beliefs.

Schultz (1987) explained teachers reluctance to accept "new" information by saying that their decisions reflect their own basic beliefs about education and child development (p.126). It would be useful to pursue the ways in which attitudinal changes, accompanied by changes in practice, can be brought about in teachers. To quote Doyle, "We urgently need to explore the reasons why educational practice often resists the findings of educational research" (p.217). If teachers cannot be convinced that grade retention is an inappropriate and ineffective educational alternative, no amount of research or legislation will result in abolishing it.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

TEACHER SURVEY

Dear First Grade Teacher.

I am interested in getting some information about grade retention for a school project. Could you please help me by answering the following questions? You do not have to sign your name if you don't wish to do so.

Many thanks,

Elizabeth Carter
School Psychologist

1. Did you recommend that any students in your 1988-89 class be retained for another year in first grade?

   _____ YES _____ NO

2. Please indicate below your first, second, and third ranked reasons for recommending retention.

   Academic problems: _____
   Social or Emotional Immaturity: _____
   Developmental Immaturity: _____
   Chronological Age: _____
   Physical Size: _____

3. Do you feel that grade retention is beneficial to children"

   _____ YES _____ NO

4. Do you feel that research supports retention as an educational alternative?

   _____ YES _____ NO

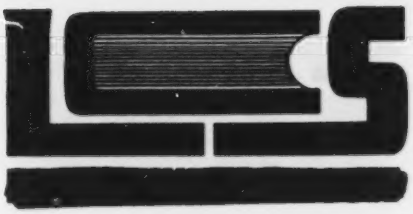
APPENDIX B

LETTER TO PARENTS PRIOR TO EVALUATION

SUPERINTENDENT [redacted]

BOARD CHAIRMAN [redacted]

COORDINATOR
DIAGNOSTIC SERVICES [redacted]



BOARD MEMBERS [redacted]

PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

January 18, 1990

Dear Parent.

As I explained on the telephone, I am doing a special project with some of the first graders at [redacted] School. The purpose of my project is to see if it is useful to give first grade teachers very specific information about children's learning strengths and learning weaknesses earlier in the school year. Usually, it takes a long time and the teacher has a lot of paperwork to do to get an assessment on a child. I have permission to bypass all of that and to begin working with the children as soon as I have permission from the parents.

I asked each first grade teacher to give me the names of several children in her room that she would like to know more about. This does not mean that your child is not doing well in school, it only means that your child's teacher feels that she could do a better job if she had more information. As soon as the assessment is done, I will contact you to share the results. My goal is to get information that will help you and your child's teacher to better meet your child's needs.

I am enclosing the parent permission form for you to sign. Please ask your child to give it to his/her teacher as soon as possible. Your cooperation will be very helpful to me and I hope that it will also benefit your child's education.

Yours truly,

Elizabeth F. Carter, M.S. NCSP
School Psychologist

[redacted]

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APPENDIX C

INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

NAME:_____ SCHOOL:_____ TEACHER:_____

Test Subtest	Raw Score	Gd. Equiv.	Age Equiv.	%	Stand. Score	Expectancy Range (+ or -)
INTELLECTUAL FUNCTIONING:						
ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING:						
Reading:						
Math:						
Other:						
PROCESS:						
Visual-Spatial:						
Motor Expressive:						
Conceptual:						
Auditory:						
Visual:						
Attention:						
OTHER:						

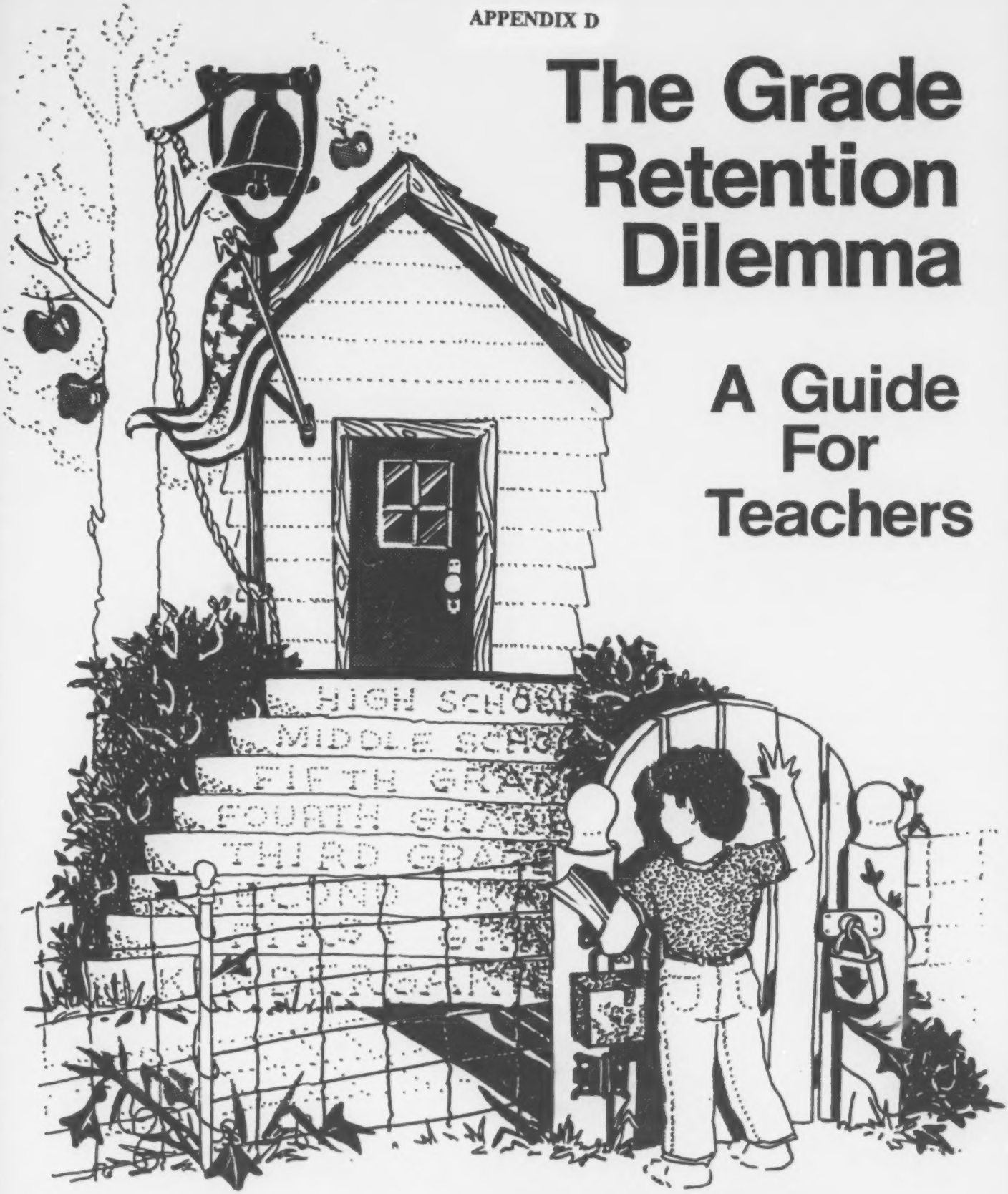
LEARNING STRENGTHS:

LEARNING WEAKNESSES:

APPENDIX D

The Grade Retention Dilemma

A Guide For Teachers



by Elizabeth F. Carter

PROMOTION OR RETENTION: A DILEMMA FOR TEACHERS

To promote and hope that the child will "bloom" and "catch up", or retain and hope that another year in the same grade will help?

This is one of the most difficult decisions that a primary level teacher must make. Even though the parents must agree and the school administration has the official "last word", most of the burden for making this decision falls on the classroom teacher. To complicate the issue, the ever-swinging pendulum of educational theory can't seem to agree either. First, grade retention is said to be bad for children, then it is said to be helpful. It is very difficult for a teacher to be sure that she is making an appropriate recommendation about this matter that is so important to a child?

ARE MORE CHILDREN BEING RETAINED?

Yes. U.S. Census data show that in 1982, 15% to 19% of all students nation-wide had been held back for at least one grade. This compares unfavorably with countries such as Japan which had a rate of less than 1%. During the 1980's the practice of grade retention grew in almost every state. During the 1987-88 school year, 28% of the students in Florida's grades kindergarten through three were held back. Last year, 11.8 percent of the kindergarten students and 10 percent of the first grade students in Florida were retained.

WHY ARE SO MANY CHILDREN BEING RETAINED?

There are four major reasons why grade retention has become so common:

First, about ten years ago, the "back to basics" movement in education, driven by academic accountability concerns, led many school districts to develop pupil progression plans that required students to master the material at each grade level before they could be promoted to the next grade. At the time, these plans were applauded for their hard core approach to the acquisition of basic skills. Unfortunately, not enough attention, financing, and support was given to meeting the needs of the children who did not learn in the same ways and at the same rates that were specified by the plan.

In addition, accountability models are usually evaluated by standardized minimum competency testing. Individual schools and school districts are concerned about their standing on these tests. As a result, children are retained early to reduce the risk of damaging this standing if they go on to the third grade and do not do well on the SSAT.

Whenever test-based accountability is put into place, the rate of grade retention rises dramatically.

A second cause is the widespread acceptance by educators of the theories of maturational psychologist such as Gesell, Illg & Ames, and Elkind. Despite the lack of supportive data, the Gesell Institute has been very successful in getting school systems to use their tests and materials to determine children's "readiness" for school tasks. Their tests have never been standardized and have an "error of measurement" of plus or minus six months. While it has some usefulness as a screening device, there is absolutely no empirical evidence that the Gesell Readiness Test is a predictor of academic success and no important decisions should be based on its results.

In addition, the development of young children is uneven. They may be less able in some areas while excelling in others. Yet, we do not recommend that children skip a grade because they have strengths that are above age level, we only hold them back when they have weaknesses that are below age expectancy. Research has clearly debunked the "birthdate effect" and the "gift of time" as having any long-range usefulness. No matter what day school begins, some child is going to be the youngest!

A third reason is the "downshifting" of the school curriculum. Kindergarteners are now being taught what used to be first grade skills while first graders are instructed at what used to be a second grade level. Many children are not ready for this level of instruction. The curriculum should be designed to meet the needs of the child and not vice versa.

A fourth reason is the belief of some parents that if their child is chronologically older than their classmates, their child will excel academically and socially. This may or may not be the case, since chronological maturity does not insure social and/or academic success. If the child is also physically larger or becomes prepubescent sooner than his or her peers, retention may turn out to be a liability rather than an asset.

IS RETENTION ALWAYS BAD?

As in any situation, there are always exceptions. There is no doubt that there are students who have benefited from grade retention. The problem is that we do not know how to identify them. A number of research studies have tried to pick out the characteristics that would tell us which children would be helped by grade retention but they were unable to do so. Since the research does find that retention is not beneficial for most students, it seems unwise to harm the many for the possible benefit of a very few.

WHAT IF I KNOW PERSONALLY OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN HELPED BY RETENTION?

You probably do. Or at least you know students who seemed to be helped during the first and second year after the retention. The research has found that most retained students do show improvement during their second year in the same grade. Some continue to do better the following year. By the third year however, the vast majority of retained students are performing at the same percentile as they were during the year before they were retained.

You probably also know of some students that continued to do well. This does occur, but, as was stated above, we don't know how to tell which students are going to benefit and which will be harmed.

HOW ARE STUDENTS HARMED BY RETENTION?

One of the most serious problems in with self-concept. Many adults will confess that one of the most significant events in their lives was being held back a grade in school. A recent study of the concerns of kindergarten students showed that being retained in kindergarten ranked third after the death of a parent and going blind! No matter how carefully a child is prepared for retention and assured that he is not "dumb", children tend to be ashamed and guilty about it. A student who has been retained also has more than a 50% chance of dropping out of school later.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES DO WE HAVE TO RETENTION?

The best alternative to retention is developmentally appropriate educational practices. Children should be taught at the level where they are functioning. Their special learning strengths and weaknesses should be identified and utilized in designing an educational program that will meet their needs. Summer school, supplementary instruction, tutoring, and guided help from parents has been shown to be more successful than retention. The Florida legislature is also looking for ways to curb the tide of retention and may offer grants and other incentives to districts that are willing to try other methods.

WHY IS THE LEGISLATURE CONCERNED ABOUT RETENTION?

Not only does grade retention not improve academic achievement and cause reduced self-esteem, it is also very expensive! The 11.8 percent of the kindergarten students and 10 percent of the first grade students in Florida who were retained last year cost the state over 100 million dollars. In a time of limited funding for education, lawmakers are looking for ways to improve education without spending more

money. They are unlikely to continue to support a practice that is expensive and doesn't work!

During the 1990 legislative session, HB 931-Part I, the Primary Restructuring bill, asks for a "cap" on the number of children in each district who remain in the elementary school for a seven years. It also asks that statewide testing programs not be administered until the fifth grade and specifies what interventions must have occurred before a student can be retained. Whether or not this particular bill passes, we should expect to hear more about grade retention in the future.

WILL THE POLICIES ON GRADE RETENTION CHANGE AGAIN?

No one knows for sure of course, but it is a safe bet that the "pendulum" will swing back toward identifying ways of meeting primary students needs other than grade retention. A tremendous volume of research generated over the past 60 years, says that it does not work. Now, more than ever, lawmakers, school administrators, and the public are seeking educational practices that are effective. There is no time or money to spend on practices that don't work.

CPRE POLICY BRIEFS
REPORTING ON ISSUES AND RESEARCH IN EDUCATION POLICY

Repeating Grades in School
Current Practice and Research Evidence

Retaining students in grade is often used as a means to raise educational standards. Many believe that repeating a grade is an effective remedy for students who have failed to master basic skills. Therefore, grade retention is relatively prevalent in this nation.

However, research on student retention indicates that it does not work as intended to assure mastery of skills, avoid failure at higher grade levels and lower dropout rates. This issue of **CPRE Policy Briefs** is based on material in a recently published book, *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention* (London: Falmer, 1989). The book's editors, Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith, address a series of questions about the practice of grade retention and the research evidence.

How prevalent is student retention in grade?

No national statistics are collected on grade retention. Census data on the proportion of students "below modal grade" are very inaccurate because of variation among states in school entrance ages, number of children who start school late and changes in the time of year when census data are collected. Table 1 summarizes retention rates from Washington DC and 13 states where data were available.

It is estimated that 5 to 7 percent of public school children (about 2 children of every classroom of 30) are retained in the U.S. annually; Southern states are overrepresented in Table 1. However, annual statistics give a misleading picture. A 6 percent annual rate year after year produces a cumulative rate of nonpromotion greater than 50 percent. Even allowing for students who repeat more than one grade, by ninth grade approximately 50 percent of all students in the U. S. have flunked at least one grade (or are no longer in school).

As discussed in the sidebar on page 3, even those children just beginning school are flunking. In some districts, as many as 50 percent of children are asked to repeat kindergarten. Altogether, current grade failure rates are as high as they were in the nineteenth century, before the days of social promotion.

Also not apparent from the aggregate annual data in Table 1 are the differential retention rates by sex and ethnicity. Data from the October 1986 Current Population Survey, averaged across grades 1-12, indicate that the percentage of overage students was 31 percent for males as compared to 22 percent for females. Similarly, the percentages of overage students are much higher for African Americans and Hispanic origin students than for whites. For male students, 29 percent of whites were overage as compared to 42 percent of African Americans and 39 percent of those of Hispanic origin. These figures somewhat underrepresent actual counts of overage students because they do not include those students who dropped out before finishing high school.

A final note is that annual rates in the U.S. are also higher than in many other industrialized nations. Primary grade retention rates are 0 percent in Japan and the United Kingdom, for example, and the median rate of grade repetition for Europe and the Soviet Union is 2 percent.

CPRE CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
Rutgers, The State University Of New Jersey
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RB-04-1 90

TABLE 1

Percentages of Students Retained in Each Grade at the Conclusion of the 1985-86 School Year

State or Region	Grade K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total (K-12)
Arizona	8.0	20.0	8.0	5.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	8.0	7.0	6.0	3.0	2.0	14.0	7.2
Delaware	5.4	17.2	4.9	2.8	2.3	3.0	3.2	9.6	7.7	15.6	16.8	8.7	7.5	8.1
District of Columbia	n.a	12.7	8.4	7.4	5.4	4.6	2.8	10.6	6.6	n/a	n/a	n.a	n.a	7.3
Florida	10.5	11.2	4.7	4.5	3.8	2.6	3.5	7.9	5.8	12.1	11.9	8.9	3.5	7.2
Georgia	8.0	12.4	6.7	7.8	5.2	3.9	5.3	6.7	7.5	18.1	12.2	8.7	4.5	8.5
Hawaii	2.0	1.6	1.0	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.5	2.1	2.8	8.9	6.9	5.5	0.8	2.6
Kentucky	4.0	5.3	4.9	3.0	2.3	1.9	2.7	5.4	3.8	9.6	6.3	4.6	3.4	5.3
Maryland	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n/a	n.a	n/a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	5.5
Mississippi	1.4	16.1	7.0	5.3	5.7	6.0	5.6	11.2	9.3	12.9	12.6	9.0	5.7	8.9
New Hampshire	4.4	9.1	3.7	1.5	1.1	1.0	7.0	3.3	3.2	10.5	5.5	4.2	4.9	4.2
North Carolina	6.0	9.3	5.0	5.7	2.7	2.1	8.1	7.9	11.0	13.9	13.2	9.3	3.9	7.7
Tennessee	3.9	10.9	5.1	3.9	3.3	3.2	3.2	8.1	6.1	9.6	8.6	7.0	5.9	6.2
Virginia	8.3	10.2	4.8	4.2	3.7	2.9	3.4	8.1	9.7	13.9	8.8	6.1	7.0	7.2
West Virginia	4.4	7.5	3.3	2.7	2.3	2.2	1.8	4.6	2.5	n/a	n.a	n.a	n.a	3.5

Why is retention in grade relatively prevalent in the United States?

Retention in grade is intended to catch students up on prerequisite skills so they are less at risk for failure when they go on to the next grade. Strict enforcement of promotion standards at every grade is expected both to ensure the competence of high school graduates and lower the dropout rate because learning deficiencies would never be allowed to accumulate.

Grade retention is very popular with the public. In a recent Gallup poll, 72 percent of the U.S. citizenry favored stricter grade-to-grade promotion standards (Gallup 1986). Such public support creates strong political pressures on schools to maintain acceptably high levels of grade retention as proof of high standards.

Furthermore, without the benefit of controlled experiments that systematically compare the performance of equally achieving students who are retained and not retained, teachers and administrators may think grade retention is successful. If a child does poorly but is promoted, his struggles in the next grade may be interpreted as evidence that he should have been retained. If a comparable child is held back and does better on the repeated material the following year, his improvement, whatever its magnitude, may be interpreted as evidence that retention works. If he does not do better in the next or succeeding grades, the response may be "at least we tried" or "he would have done even more poorly without the extra year."

Does repeating a grade improve student achievement?

In a recent synthesis of research, C. Thomas Holmes (1989) of the University of Georgia reviewed 63 controlled studies where retained students were followed up and compared to similar students who went directly on to the next grade.

Fifty-four studies showed that when retained children went on to the next grade they actually performed more poorly on average than if they had gone on without repeating. For example, suppose that retained and control groups started out at the 10th percentile on standardized achievement tests at the end of first grade. The retained group was made to repeat first grade while the control group was promoted to second grade. Two years later when the retained children completed second grade they might be (on average) at the 20th percentile. However, the control children, would be achieving ahead of their retained counterparts by roughly .31 standard deviation units, or at roughly the 30th percentile on average.

When Holmes selected only 25 studies with the greatest amount of statistical control, the negative effect of retention was again confirmed. Indeed, only 9 studies of the entire 63 showed overall positive results, and most of these compared retained students who had received extra help through individualized programs and smaller classes to promoted control children who had not been given comparable assistance. Even so, the apparent benefits of retention tended to diminish over time so that differences in performance between retained and control children disappeared.

What are the emotional effects of retention?

Holmes' synthesis of controlled studies included nearly 50 studies with some social or emotional outcome measures. On average, retained students do more poorly than matched controls on follow-up measures of social adjustment, attitude toward school, behavioral outcomes, and attendance.

Children perceive retention as a punishment. When researcher Deborah Byrnes (1989) interviewed children and used euphemisms to refer to spending two years in the same grade, even first graders said, "Oh, you mean flunking." Eighty-seven percent of the children interviewed said that being retained made them feel "sad," "bad," "upset," or "embarrassed." Only 6 percent of retained children gave positive answers about how retention made them feel like, "you learn more" or "it lets you catch up."

In a much quoted study of childhood

stressors by Kaoru Yamamoto (1980), children rated the prospect of repeating a grade as more stressful than "wetting in class" or being caught stealing. The only two life events that children said would be more stressful than being retained are going blind or losing a parent.

Does nonpromotion prevent school dropouts?

Researchers of the dropout phenomenon have consistently found that student retention is associated with an increased probability of dropping out, rather than the reverse. Dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates. Students who repeat two grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100 percent.

While this relationship has been documented for a long period of time, only recently have we understood that retention affects dropping out independently of achievement. Grissom and Shepard (1989) conducted three large-scale studies, involving 20,000 to 80,000 students each, where they examined the retention-dropout relation after controlling for achievement. They found that with equally poor achievement (and controlling for other background characteristics associated with dropping out), students who repeated a year were 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out of school. For example, in Austin, Texas, males of African-American origin with below average achievement have a 45 percent chance of dropping out of school; but males of the same origin and identical achievement scores who have repeated a year of school have a 75 percent chance of leaving school before graduation. A substantially increased risk for dropping out after repeating a grade was found even in a large affluent suburban school district with only a 4 percent dropout rate. The evidence is clear: school policies meant to raise the

The new phenomenon of kindergarten retention

The decade of the 1980s saw a dramatic rise in the number of children asked to repeat kindergarten. In districts with special programs for "unready" kindergartners, as many as 50 percent are held back. An extra year before first grade is offered in a variety of different forms: transition classrooms before first grade, developmental kindergarten before kindergarten, and straight repeating of kindergarten. According to its advocates, kindergarten retention is different from retention in later grades because it is intended to prevent school failure before it occurs.

Controlled studies do not support the benefits claimed for extra-year programs, however, and negative side effects occur just as they do for retention in later grades. In a review of 16 controlled studies on the effects of extra-year programs, the predominant finding is one of no difference (Shepard 1989). For example, when researchers follow extra-year children to the end of first grade or as far as fifth grade and compare their performance to unready children whose parents refused the extra year, the extra-year children perform no better academically despite being a year older for their grade. The conclusion of no benefit holds true even for studies where children were selected on the basis of immaturity rather than for academic risk, and even where a special transition curriculum was offered rather than repeating kindergarten.

Although the majority of teachers believe that retention in kindergarten does not carry a social stigma "if handled properly," extra-year children are more likely to have lower self-concepts and poorer attitudes toward school compared to controls. Parent interviews reveal both short-term and long-term distress associated with the retention decision (teasing by peers and tears because friends are going on; references years later such as, "If I had only been able... I would be in third grade now.")

Various analysts have suggested that kindergarten retention is an educational fad, gaining popularity because of the apparent need to remove unready children from increasingly narrow academic demands in kindergarten and first grade. Long periods of seat work, worksheets, and coloring inside the lines are required of children. These demands are inconsistent with the normal development of 5 and 6 years olds.

Although these trends might have originated because schools wanted to teach **more**, inappropriate curriculum has actually resulted in children learning **less**. For example, kindergartners can solve addition and subtraction problems if they are given blocks or beads to count, but will fail if expected to learn from flash cards. Young children, however bright, are in a concrete stage of learning and are not ready for symbolic representations.

Numerous national associations have issued policy statements calling for more developmentally appropriate curriculum in early grades and reform of harmful instructional practices. These organizations include The National Association for the Education of Young Children, National Association of State Boards of Education, Association for Childhood Education International, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, International Reading Association, National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Council of Teachers of English.

number of grade retentions will more likely increase rather than reduce school dropout rates.

Why does retention in grade fail to improve performance and prevent dropping out?

Researchers have not been able to tell why retention doesn't work as intended. Some have speculated that the negative emotional effects of repeating harm subsequent learning. Others have suggested that going through the same material again is a crude and ineffective way to individualize instruction since a child may be more than one year behind in some subjects and only a few months behind in others.

Because retention itself is considered to be the treatment, there is usually no additional effort to correct the lack of teaching and learning that occurred the first time through. In other words, the child may have failed to achieve grade-level standards because the programs or teachers he had were ineffective. Merely repeating the same curriculum or instruction is not likely to fix the problem.

What alternatives are there to retention in grade?

There are numerous ways to provide extra instructional help focussed on a student's specific learning needs within the context of normal grade promotion. Remedial help, before and after school programs, summer school, instructional aides to work with target children in the regular classroom, and no-cost peer tutoring are all more effective than retention. Unlike retention, each of these solutions has been shown to result in

Accelerated schools: An alternative to holding kids back

Aside from having students repeat grades, other common strategies designed to help raise achievement among at-risk students include remedial or compensatory services. Another approach is to accelerate student learning, according to Henry Levin. In a report published by CPRE, Levin describes a model of a transitional elementary school designed to bring students up to grade level by the end of sixth grade. The Accelerated School model is being piloted in California, Missouri, Illinois and Utah.

The CPRE report, *Accelerated Schools for At-Risk Students*, discusses three major assumptions underlying the organization of an Accelerated School: (1) the strategy must enlist a **unity of purpose** among all of the participants; (2) the strategy must **empower** all major participants and raise their sense of efficacy and responsibility for school outcomes; and (3) the approach must build on the strengths of the participants rather than criticize their weaknesses.

The entire organization of the Accelerated School focuses on preparing children for the educational mainstream. Intervention is not limited to "pull out" sessions in a school where the main agenda addresses other goals, according to Levin. In addition to the overall structure, the accelerated school also features:

- School-based governance—curriculum, instructional strategies and other school policies are decided by school staff within guidelines set by the district.
- Pupil and school assessment that serves both accountability and diagnostic purposes.
- Substantial parent involvement and training.
- Use of community resources such as social service agencies, volunteer groups and arts and business organizations.
- Extended-day sessions for tutoring, homework, physical activities, etc.

Accelerated Schools for At-Risk Students by Henry Levin (September 1988. 39 pp. No. RR-010. $4) is available prepaid from CPRE, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08901.

more positive achievement gains for participating children than for controls. Cross-age peer tutoring, for example, where an average 5th grade student might tutor a 2nd grader who is behind in math, shows learning gains for both the target students and the tutors.

Educators are also experimenting with alternative structures of schooling and other innovative strategies to meet the needs of those students who are at risk (see sidebar on page 4). These programs should be studied for their potential for improving student achievement.

One of the fears about social promotion is that deficient students will be passed on endlessly as if no one had noticed their problem. Rather than ban retention but do nothing else, creative groups of teachers in a few schools have developed staffing teams (of regular teachers) to work out a plan with the next-grade receiving teacher about how to address the learning difficulties for each student who would have been a retention candidate.

Similarly, some schools "place" poor performing students in the next grade with a formally agreed upon Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) akin to the Special Education model of intervention. The decision to allow a deficient student to advance to the next grade with a plan for special help is analogous to prevalent school policies for gifted students. Instead of skipping academically gifted students one or two grades, schools generally place them in their normal grade and provide them with enriched instruction. Normal grade placement is considered better for them socially and the amount they are ahead is generally not the same in each subject, and not a tidy 12-month amount. The same arguments can be used to explain why retention does not improve achievement but promotion plus remediation does.

Finally, there is reason to believe that what poorly achieving students need is a more inspired and challenging curriculum, one that involves them in solving meaningful problems, rather than repetitive drill on basic skills. The belief that children have to master component skills before moving on to comprehension and problem solving consigns slow learners to school work that is not only boring but devoid of any connection to the

TABLE 2

Estimated Annual Cost of Grade Retention Nationally

2.4 million students retained every year.	Based on 40 million K-12 enrollment (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1985) and 6% annual retention rate (see Table 1).
× $4,051 per pupil cost.	1985-86 average cost per pupil in public elementary and secondary schools. (U. S. Dept. of Education, Center for Education Statistics).
= $9,722,400,00	

Nearly $10 billion is spent annually on retention in U. S. public schools.

kinds of problems they encounter in the real world. Furthermore, current learning theory indicates that skills cannot be learned effectively nor applied to new problems unless they are learned in context. For example, students who are given lots and lots of problems to solve about how much tile to buy to floor a room with irregular dimensions are likely to be better at both multiplication facts and problem solving than students who must memorize all their multiplication tables before confronting one such problem.

How much does retention cost?

Collectively, school districts spend nearly $10 billion a year to pay for the extra year of schooling necessitated by retaining 2.4 million students. Table 2 provides a summary of the estimated costs of retention each year in the U.S.

Ten billion dollars would support substantial alternative efforts, such as remedial programs, summer school, classroom aides, or reduced class size to help at-risk students learn. For example, summer school costs only approximately $1300 per student compared to $4051 for a repeated grade.

The costs of retention are not generally clear to policymakers and the public. One reason is that students often move during their years of school. A student spending four years in a district will incur the same costs whether he enrolls in grades 1-2-3-4 or grades 1-2-3-3. By the time he has moved to his 14th or 15th year of school, he is highly unlikely to live in the same district in which he was retained earlier on. No one jurisdiction bears the cost of retention in such cases.

Therefore, the costs of retention are hidden in the general education budget. In essence, a school simply bills the costs of retaining a child to the state agency in per-pupil costs. The most cost-effective alternative programs, such as tutors or summer school, must be requested and justified as line-item add ons.

What policy implications are suggested by research on retention?

The research on retention clearly indicates that policymakers and educators should support remediation and other instructional strategies proven to be effective within normal grade placement. Furthermore, current research suggests the value of focusing on curricular reforms that ensure learning by providing opportunities for at-risk students to engage in solving real problems instead of memorizing facts that seem meaningless.

Since the public so strongly supports retention, broad-based educational efforts addressing the benefits of alternative strategies may be needed. Among the facts the public needs to know is how many students are actually retained currently; it is evident that better data is needed. Only a handful of states collect such data at present.

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The Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE)

CPRE unites four of the nation's leading research institutions in a unique venture to improve the quality of schooling. CPRE conducts research on the implementation and effects of state and local education policies. By communicating its findings to policymakers and practitioners, the Center contributes to the framing of policies to improve education. Members of the CPRE consortium are: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; Michigan State University; Stanford University; and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CPRE is sponsored by the Office of Research in the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).

CPRE's research activities are concentrated in five major areas:

- Curriculum and Student Standards
- Teacher Policies
- Educational Indicators and Monitoring
- New Roles and Responsibilities
- Evolution of the Reform Movement

In addition to conducting research in these areas, CPRE publishes research reports, briefs and case studies on a variety of education issues.* The Center also sponsors invitational policy workshops for state and local policymakers.

For further information on CPRE, contact: Lynn McFarlane, Assistant Director for Communications, CPRE, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers-The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, NJ 08901; phone (201) 828-3872.

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APPENDIX E

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT REGARDING PARENT MEETING

Repeating a grade is subject of talk

Democrat staff report

Parents who are not sure whether their children should repeat the same elementary-school grade again next year can hear the latest research findings on that topic this evening.

At 7:30 p.m., [redacted] County school psychologist Elizabeth Carter will speak on the current research and recommendations for holding elementary-school students back a year. The talk will be in the music room at [redacted] Elementary School, 2930 [redacted] Road.

The presentation is particularly directed at parents who believe — or have been told — that their child is immature or developmentally young and would benefit from remaining in the same grade.

THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT
May 9, 1990

APPENDIX F

PARENT SURVEY

Dear Parent.

I am interested in getting some information about grade retention for a school project. Would you help me by answering the following questions? You can skip any questions that you don't want to answer and you do not have to sign your name.

1. Were you retained in a grade in school?

   _____ YES _____ NO

2. If you were retained, do you feel that it was helpful?

   _____ YES _____ NO

3. Have any of your children been retained a grade in school?

   _____ YES _____ NO

4. If your answer to #3 was Yes, do you feel that it was helpful?

   _____ YES _____ NO

5. Would you consider retaining your first grader?

   _____ YES _____ NO

6. Do you feel that grade retention is beneficial to children?

   _____ YES _____ NO

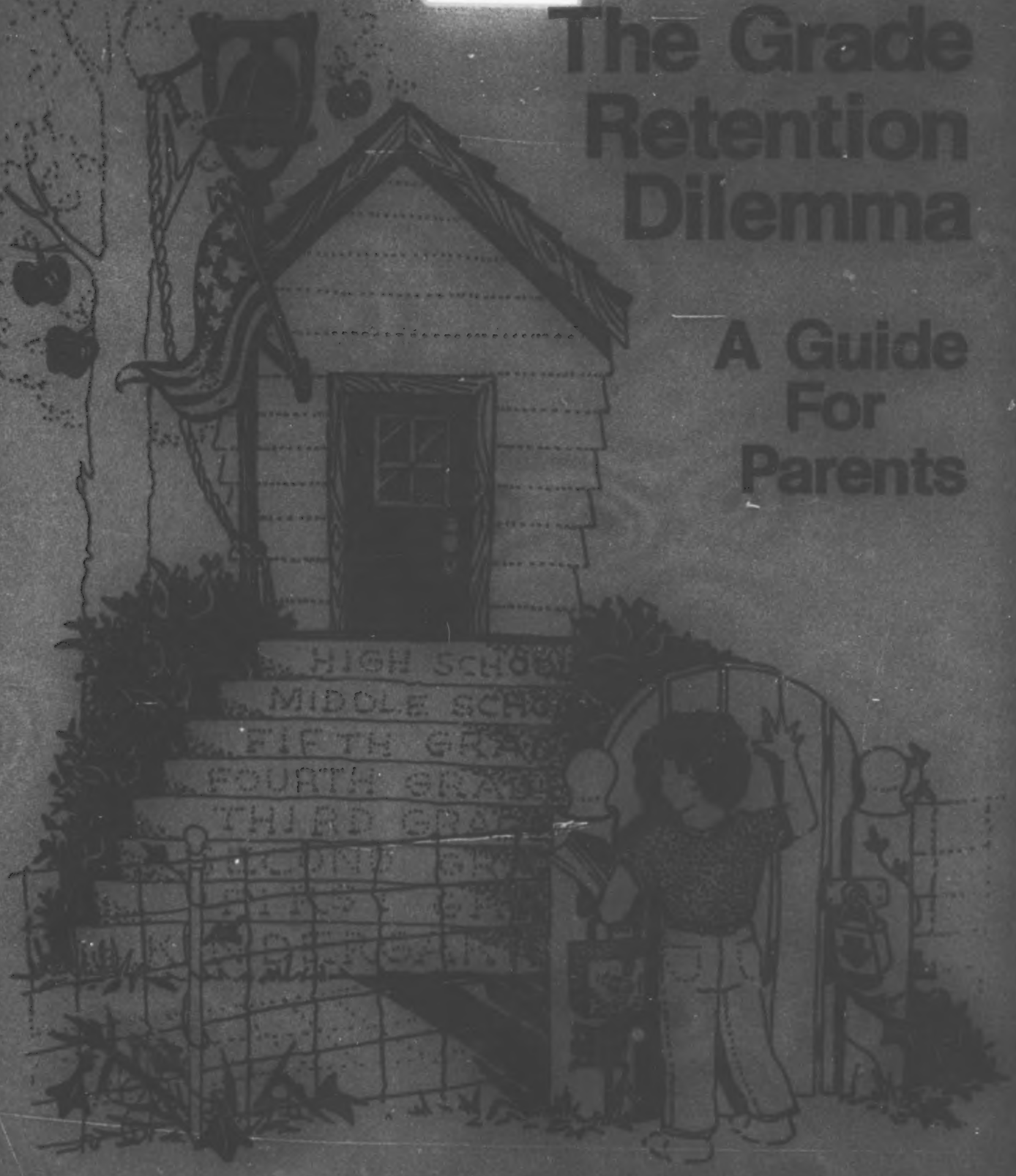
Thank you for your time.

Elizabeth Carter
School Psychologist

APPENDIX G

The Grade Retention Dilemma

A Guide For Parents



by Elizabeth F. Carter

GRADE PROMOTION OR GRADE RETENTION
A DILEMMA FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

To promote and hope that the child will "bloom" and "catch up", or retain and hope that another year in the same grade will help?

There are few questions as difficult for parents and teachers to answer as whether or not to retain a child in his or her present grade for another school year. "Expert" opinions can be found that favor both sides of the question and many parents feel that they lack the educational expertise to make this important decision for their child. Teachers may also feel uncomfortable since they are aware that their opinion will have an important effect on the outcome and they feel a deep responsibility to make the best possible recommendations for the children that they teach.

IS " GRADE RETENTION" THE SAME THING AS "FAILING"?

Grade retention, nonpromotion, developmental progression, being "held back", "flunking", and "failing" are all terms that are used to describe what occurs when a student is remains in the same grade for a second year. Educational professionals and most parents avoid terms such as "failing" and "flunking" because they are negative and because they may not truly describe the situation.

ARE MORE CHILDREN BEING RETAINED NOW THAN IN THE PAST?

Yes. U.S. Census data show that in 1982, 15% to 19% of all students nation-wide had been held back for at least one grade. This compares unfavorably with countries such as Japan which had a rate of less than 1%. During the 1980's the practice of grade retention grew in almost every state. During the 1987-88 school year, 28% of the students in Florida's grades kindergarten through three were held back. Last year, 11.8 percent of the kindergarten students and 10 percent of the first grade students in Florida were retained. A retention rate of 9 percent is considered to be high.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

There are three main reasons for the increase. They are the move in education toward mandated minimum competencies for promotion, the acceptance in many elementary schools of the "maturational" theory of child development, and the lack of instructional programs that can address the needs of a variety of different children.

WHAT ARE "MANDATED MINIMUM COMPETENCIES FOR PROMOTION"?

These are the regulations that are put in place when a school system develops a promotion/retention plan that

requires a student to master the material at each grade level before they can be promoted to the next grade. These are not necessarily bad plans. They can be very good if they take into consideration the reasons why students may not be able to meet the requirements and have plans to help them. Unfortunately, not enough attention, financing, and support was given to meeting the needs of the children who did not learn in the same ways and at the same rates that were specified by the plan.

In addition, accountability models are usually evaluated by standardized minimum competency testing. Individual schools and school districts are concerned about their standing on these tests. As a result, children are retained early to reduce the risk of damaging this standing if they go on to the third grade and do not do well on the SSAT. Whenever test-based accountability is put into place, the rate of grade retention rises dramatically.

WHAT IS THE "MATURATIONAL THEORY OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT"?

They are ideas about how children grow and learn as described primarily by the Gesell Institute of Human Development. Some of the ideas are excellent and have been very useful to people who work with young children. Other ideas have not been shown to be sound by research and by experience. The Gesellian theorist are the only ones who have openly recommended grade retention as a good practice for young children. Terms such as "unready", developmentally young", "birthdate effect" and "youngness" are often used to describe why children should not progress with their peers. A test developed by the Institute is often used to determine the degree of "unreadiness" or "youngness" that a child has. While these tests have some value as screening instruments, they have never been standardized and there is a wide possibility for testing error and no important decisions should be based on its results.

In addition, the development of young children is uneven. They may be less able in some areas while excelling in others. Yet, we do not recommend that children skip a grade because they have strengths that are above age level, we only hold them back when they have weaknesses that are below age expectancy. Research has clearly debunked the "birthdate effect" and the "gift of time" as having any long-range usefulness. No matter what day school begins, some child is going to be the youngest!

HOW ARE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS INAPPROPRIATE?

In the past few years there has been a "downshifting" of the school curriculum. Kindergarteners are now being taught what used to be first grade skills while first graders are instructed at what used to be a second grade level. Many

children are not ready for this level of instruction. The curriculum should be designed to meet the needs of the child and not vice versa.

IS RETENTION ALWAYS BAD?

As in any situation, there are always exceptions. There is no doubt that there are students who have benefited from grade retention. The problem is that we do not know how to identify them. A number of research studies have tried to pick out the characteristics that would tell us which children would be helped by grade retention but they were unable to do so. Since the research does find that retention is not beneficial for most students, it seems unwise to harm the many for the possible benefit of a very few.

HOW ARE STUDENTS HARMED BY RETENTION?

One of the most serious problems in with self-concept. Many adults will confess that one of the most significant events in their lives was being held back a grade in school. A recent study of the concerns of kindergarten students showed that being retained in kindergarten ranked third after the death of a parent and going blind! No matter how carefully a child is prepared for retention and assured that he is not "dumb", children tend to be ashamed and guilty about it. A student who has been retained also has more than a 50% chance of dropping out of school later.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES DO WE HAVE TO RETENTION?

The best alternative to retention is developmentally appropriate educational practices. Children should be taught at the level where they are functioning. Their special learning strengths and weaknesses should be identified and utilized in designing an educational program that will meet their needs. Summer school, supplementary instruction, tutoring, and guided help from parents has been shown to be more successful than retention. The Florida legislature is also looking for ways to curb the tide of retention and may offer grants and other incentives to schools that are willing to try other methods.

WHY IS THE LEGISLATURE CONCERNED ABOUT RETENTION?

Not only does grade retention not improve academic achievement and cause reduced self-esteem, it is also very expensive! The 11.8 percent of the kindergarten students and 10 percent of the first grade students in Florida who were retained last year cost the state over 100 million dollars. In a time of limited funding for education, lawmakers are looking for ways to improve education without spending more money. They are unlikely to continue to support a practice that is expensive and doesn't work!

WILL THE POLICIES ON GRADE RETENTION CHANGE AGAIN?

No one knows for sure of course, but it is a safe bet that the "pendulum" will swing back toward identifying ways of meeting primary students needs other than grade retention. A tremendous volume of research generated over the past 60 years, says that it does not work. Now, more than ever, lawmakers, school administrators, and the public are seeking educational practices that are effective. There is no time or money to spend on practices that don't work.

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS DO IF THEIR CHILD IS RECOMMENDED FOR RETENTION?

Ask for a conference with your child's teacher that includes the school primary specialist and the principal and guidance counselor if possible. Ask that examples of your child's work, all test results, and the status of his/her Key Skills testing be available. Ask why your child is being considered for retention and what information is being used to support that recommendation. If terms such as "immature", or "developmentally young" are used, ask what those terms mean and what criteria are used to determine them. Ask how your child compares with the other children of his/her age. Ask for an explanation of your child's perceived strengths as well as his/her weaknesses. Ask what alternatives are available through the school such as Summer School, remedial classes, tutoring, etc. Ask if your child needs a psycho-educational evaluation by the school psychologist. Most importantly, ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP!

APPENDIX H

APPROVAL FROM CPRE TO REPRODUCE COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS

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May 23, 1990

Elizabeth F. Carter
1821 Atlantis Place
Tallahassee, FL 32303

Dear Ms. Carter:

Thank you for your letter and comments regarding our policy brief on student retention. The brief was published January 1990. Please consider this letter as written permission to reproduce the brief. Again, I would appreciate it if you would keep me informed about your use of the material.

I've enclosed a copy of our most recent issue of CPRE Policy Briefs. I hope you find it interesting. We will place you on our mailing list to receive future briefs as well as announcements of other CPRE publications.

Sincerely,

Lynn McFarlane

Lynn McFarlane
Assistant Director
for Communications

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APPENDIX II

PRIMARY GRADES ADVISORY WORKGROUP
January 17, 1990
9:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
Room 212 House Office Building
Tallahassee, Florida

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Persons knowledgeable on the topics of primary education and early literacy development were asked to meet with the chairman, members, and staff of the House of Representatives Committee on Education to discuss the issue of young children failing to be successful learners in school and the resulting large statewide percentage of children who are not promoted to the next grade at the end of kindergarten and first grade. There was general agreement on the following points:

There is a recognized problem in Florida (and nationally) and school districts are using diverse methods to attack it.

Although school districts are using a variety of methods to attack the problem, there is not enough known about what works in Florida and what doesn't. There is a need for stringent evaluation of the programs presently in place, as well as any new programs that might be proposed.

There is a dire need for information and inservice regarding appropriate primary education by:

teachers
principals
district administrators
school board members
the general public

There is a legitimate need for minimal student standards and accurate accountability measures for the primary grades; however, some present methods may need to be changed. Assessment of a child's individual progress and assessment of the effectiveness of schools should be separated. Standards and accountability should free districts to be innovative in solving problems rather than serving as barriers to positive change.

The following state policies may serve as barriers to positive change in the primary grades:

Minimal standards
Third grade SSAT
Pupil progression plans
An accountability system more appropriate for older students
Exceptional education funding and guidelines
Summer school funding regulations
Separation of PREP and PRIME programs
Chapter I and compensatory education guidelines

Funding for instructional materials
Teacher certification requirements
Requirement that kindergarten be satisfactorily completed before first grade entry
Acceptance of standardized test data as the sole criteria for meeting state mandates
Data reporting requirements
Florida Performance Measurement System

Monetary grants and selective waivers of regulation, separately or together, would serve as incentives to districts wanting to search for solutions to the problem.

Business and the community as a whole need to be involved in planning and implementing solutions to the problem.

Time is needed: to try various solutions; to find out what works; to implement any changes.

There is a readiness for change at the school level. This readiness can be an positive force if given help and direction at the state level.

APPENDIX III

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

April 9, 1990

BRIEFING PAPER: PRIMARY GRADES RESTRUCTURING

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

BRIEFING PAPER: PRIMARY GRADES RESTRUCTURING

Present Situation:

The Committee on Education has become concerned that an estimated one-fourth to one-third of the children in Florida's elementary schools are failing to learn adequately and not being promoted to the next grade at sometime during the primary grades (kindergarten through third). Last year, 11.8 percent of the kindergarten students failed to be promoted at the end of the school year, and 10 percent of the first graders were retained. These children stayed in the same grade for a second year or were assigned to a "transitional grade". This extra year is estimated to have cost the state more than 100 million dollars.

Traditionally, many teachers, parents, and the public have felt that children benefit from this "extra year to grow", or that failure builds character and raises school achievement. Recent educational research refutes this conventional wisdom, however. Studies have found that nonpromotion does not increase achievement; rather, it leads to reduced self-esteem and dislike of school, and is thought to be a leading cause of eventual school drop-out.

Legislative Options:

If the Legislature accepts the premise that primary retentions have a high fiscal and human cost, steps might be taken to reduce failure and encourage a more developmentally appropriate curriculum and structure. This reform and intervention would be less expensive than the current cost of providing extra years of schooling for children who "fail".

Legislative action might include, but not be limited to, the following options:

Revise PREP to restore the intent of the original legislation.

Section 230.2312, F.S., established the Florida Primary Education Program (PREP) in 1979 as the structure for grades K through 3. Subsection (4) states that at the end of third grade, a student shall: (1) enter fourth grade, (2) continue in the PREP program for one more year, or (3) be referred to exceptional student education. Clarifying the original intent of PREP would discourage retaining children until the third grade. Child development experts hold that many children can "catch-up" by that age, especially if they have extra help along the way.

Involve business and the community in planning appropriate education for the primary grades.

Business and community supporters of non-promotion argue "it is helping to restore discipline to a national school system gone soft". Seventy-two percent of the persons responding to the 1986 Gallup poll said that "promotion from grade to grade should be more strict than it is now". Many lay persons also support a strong traditional "phonics-only" approach to beginning reading. The Legislature could promote business and community understanding of the problem and support for change by involving non-educators in planning.

Modify the accountability measures for the primary grades.

Knowledgeable persons state that schools and districts are retaining children early in order to prevent those children from going on to third grade and possibly not doing well on the SSAT. These same experts feel that concern about tested skills inhibits districts from trying innovative teaching strategies. Legislative action to modify accountability measures for the primary grades might alleviate the public relations impact of comparison test scores, make school districts more open piloting innovative curriculum and school structures for young children, and restore the original intent of PREP.

Make failure the "intervention of last resort" and ensure adequate parental involvement in the decision process.

Experts in early learning report that interventions such as summer school, supplementary instruction, tutoring, guided help at home, and other intensive assistance is more successful with young children than retention in grade. Legislative action could ensure that retention occur only after other methods to assist the child have been tried and found unsuccessful.

Encourage more developmentally appropriate school district policies and practices.

In many schools, first grade work is now expected in kindergarten, and second and third grade work has been pushed down to first grade. Many young children are not developmentally ready for high academic expectations and the associated formal reading and writing tasks. Legislative action could encourage more appropriate policies regarding learning activities, instructional materials, testing, grading, pupil progression, and date of first school entrance.

Provide incentives to school districts for restructuring the primary grades and for piloting less traditional learning methods and materials.

Recent national studies have recommended restructuring of the primary grades, including changes in curriculum and teaching methods. The Legislature could offer incentives (grants or waivers of certain regulations) to districts for primary grade restructuring activities and for piloting less traditional learning methods and materials.

Identify and remove other state policy barriers to change in the primary grades.

Other barriers to the development of more effective primary education in Florida may exist but may not have been identified by the Legislature. The Legislature can seek out persons knowledgeable about primary education and early literacy development to assist in the identification of barriers and to suggest improvements in state policy.

Committee on Education
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